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Time, time, time . . .

Some of you joined us just before this in a meditation on time called The Circle of the Church Year,<sup>ii</sup> or you may be jumping in now. Now we will ponder for a few minutes what the Gospel lesson from Mark 13:24-37, appointed for the first Sunday in Advent, and the Circle of the Church Year and its message that for every beginning there is an ending and for every ending there is a beginning, and what these stories have to teach us.

Today is the first day of Year B in our three-year cycle of Sunday readings, and we begin with the Gospel of Mark, who tells us nothing of the manger and the shepherds and the angels and the magi. The actual Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist, who'll come onstage hollering about repentance next week. Bishop Goff gets to preach that sermon, and I'm a little jealous. THIS week is even less Christmassy – we get suffering and a darkened sun and moon and the stars falling out of the sky – and a few sentences earlier Jesus was thundering about wars and rumors of wars, brother betraying brother, suffering and woe - basically an apocalyptic 90's movie of mass destruction.

But this biblical description of the end of time is actually very different from those movies, if you lean in close. The biblical story isn't about changing the outcome, like the movies. It's about the outcome that God has *already* put in place.

Jesus is saying, AFTER THE SUFFERING; after everything, even the cosmos, has fallen apart; after it looks like the light has gone out completely, then you will see the Son of Man coming in power and glory, and he will send out his angels to the ends of the earth. The Parousia, the Second Coming, is not primarily about destruction. It is primarily about redemption and renewal. It's about letting go of what must go and transfiguring that which is good into its divine fullness.

It begins with the birth of Jesus, which is the end of our estrangement from God and the beginning of our atonement with God.

It begins with the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the end of the power of death and the beginning of the promise of eternal life.

It begins with the return of Jesus, which is the end of the present age of time in between, and the beginning of the Parousia, the time beyond time when God is all in all, and the knowledge of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

This ending – the end of the world – is a beginning, just as for every beginning there is an ending. When this once-new, now-old creation has worn itself out, or blown itself up, or whatever apocalyptic suffering will come, when seems that the lights have gone out – then Christ himself arrives with the angel armies to usher in the fulfillment of the new creation. A new heaven and a new earth, redeemed from the old. The heavenly city, Jerusalem, materializing out of God's imagination right here – with the promise that we will be a part of it, and God will dwell with us eternally.

After Jesus tells us about all this uproar and chaos and transformation, he says something kind of strange. First he says that nobody knows when it will happen – I guess the angels just keep their Ready Bags by the giant pearl gates – but then he says, keep awake. Keep awake.

I don't know about you, but I find this a little odd. I mean, I've fallen asleep in some pretty rowdy settings – I've even fallen asleep at ACL at a Tom Petty concert, and I've even fallen asleep at a performance of STOMP, but I don't think I would sleep through the arrival of the risen Christ in power and glory with all the hosts of heaven.



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However, I do think that I am very often unconscious – of all the ways that new life and new creation spring out of despair and destruction every day. I think I fall asleep to the promise that although the darkness might obscure the light of Christ for a time, that the stars may seem to fall from the sky as shadows cover the sun, no darkness will ever extinguish the light of the Son of Man.

When Jesus spoke of the days of trial and tribulation, of suffering and brother fighting brother, of political turmoil and dislocation – he was speaking into the times he lived in, into the near future, and the long-distant future. And so this is a word to us, now. We are not asked to ignore the darkness, but we are called to remain awake to the coming the light. We are called to look for resurrection and ascension and Parousia breaking into the muddle of suffering and contention.

I remember joking once to a church administrator that I worked with that if whatever event she was telling me about had actually happened, we better say our prayers because Jesus was coming back. Without missing a beat, she announced, "I'm ready." "You are?" I asked. "Yes! I hope it's today!" I have pondered that conversation for years. Because I wasn't at all sure I was ready or even hoping for the Second Coming of Christ, say, this afternoon. But Jesus was clear – we'd better be. To live into that state of readiness has been the project of a lifetime, at least for me, and it makes life pretty exciting. You kind of can't go wrong – all the beauty and justice and love you can squeeze out of this life, and exponentially more of all that in the next.

Maybe more, I need to stay awake to the glimpses in this life of that Parousia-Second Coming-Holy City life – the places where heaven breaks into earth, and into hell on earth. It happens all the time, if we're watching.

Jesus is telling us not to give up and let go of our journey of faith when the hard times come, because they bring us closer to a new beginning. It's a promise, or a reminder, that every beginning is and ending, and every ending is a beginning, and that nothing loved by the Lord – most especially his precious children – is ever lost forever, no matter how what the powers – the demonic forces of destruction that come from the Father of Lies – would lead us to believe. That promise, that reminder, is what Saint Paul was talking about when he said in his magnum opus, his letter to the Romans,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that is true yesterday, it is true tomorrow, it is true at the hour of your birth and at the hour of your death, and it is true today, the first Sunday in Advent, so stay awake and watch for it. It may happen today, right in your own house.

This Advent, watch for the Lord to come. He comes as a newborn baby boy who nobody saw coming. He comes as the triumphant Lord of Life who we cannot see coming. And he comes in the everyday rays of light and hope that break up the present darkness.

Watch for him. He comes.



<sup>i</sup>Liturgical Calendar Image from St. Paul's Bellingham, Washington

<sup>ii</sup> The Circle of the Church year is a meditation on the nature of time and the pattern of the liturgical year by the Rev. Dr. Jerome Berryman. It is set forth [The Complete Guide to Godly Play: Volume 2, Revised and Expanded](#) by Jerome W. Berryman, Cheryl V. Minor, et al. Jun 15, 2017

<sup>iii</sup>Image from the Uffizi Gallery

<sup>iv</sup> Piero di Cosimo, Incarnazione, Uffizi Gallery