

Occupy Advent

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Mark 13:24-37

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Advent 1B



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Mark 13:24-37

[Jesus said]

“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”



So ... lots to do this weekend, huh?

Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving Day, is traditionally the beginning of the Christmas shopping season according to major retailers who open very early, this year as early as midnight on Thursday, and offer promotional sales to kick off the buying

frenzy. “You want 1 of the 3, 48” plasma screen TVs in the store for \$99.99? Better get here by 3 am!” It has routinely been the busiest shopping day of the year since 2005. You probably knew that. But this I didn’t know – Black Friday originated here in Philadelphia, where beginning in 1966 the term was used to describe the heavy and disruptive pedestrian and vehicle traffic which would occur on the day after Thanksgiving. It wasn’t until later that it began to be offered as “Black Friday,” the point at which retailers begin to turn a profit, or are “in the black”.

Then tomorrow, of course, is “Cyber Monday,” the Monday immediately following Black Friday created on November 28, 2005 when a Shop.org press release read “Cyber Monday’s Quickly Becoming One of the Biggest Online Shopping Days of the Year.” In case you didn’t know, you’re supposed to shop online tomorrow where you can great deals.

Or, there’s always yesterday, “Small Business Saturday,” the newest in the pantheon of American holy days. It’s a day created by American Express to encourage shopping at local, small businesses on one of the busiest shopping weekends of the year. It was first celebrated last year, November 27, 2010.

What about Sunday? Well, Sunday after Thanksgiving is the heaviest travel day of the year when 13.7 million long-distance trips are made. While Christmas and Thanksgiving record about the same amount of travel, Thanksgiving’s high volume of travel is concentrated in fewer days, which places a heavier burden on the transportation system. During the five days surrounding Thanksgiving, an average of 10.8 million trips are taken per day, nearly double the average number of daily trips for the whole year. So I figure there’s less shopping if people are traveling, right?

When asked in a poll which days they plan to shop over the Thanksgiving weekend, 40 percent of consumers said Black Friday, followed by 39 percent who said Cyber Monday; 24 percent indicated Saturday, 15 percent selected Sunday, and 11

percent said Thanksgiving Day. According to Experian Marketing Services, Black Friday is the second biggest day during the holiday season for email transactions trailing only Cyber Monday. Also, Black Friday received the most traffic among retail sites in 2010 with 170 million total visits to the top 500 retail sites.

Whew ... a busy weekend all around!

And, oh, by the way, Advent starts today.

Remember Advent? The season *before* Christmas ... not the beginning of the Christmas season like the marketing tempters want you to believe ... but only the prelude to the season which begins on December 25 when we *start* our celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Thanksgiving Day, Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Travel Sunday, Cyber Monday – bell-ringers are outside stores, holiday music floods the loud speakers, I saw Santa at Home Depot, advertisers are now in their “consumerism-as-therapy” mode. And Jesus is saying: This is a good time to think about the world falling apart. That’s Advent.

It’s not that we’re trying to be morose, it’s just that we’re supposed to have a different perspective on what’s happening in the world and recognize that the ending of the world as it now operates is a really good thing. Over these four weeks leading to Christmas, the scripture we read and hear is not filled with nostalgic, romantic remembrances of the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth, but with eerie images of cosmic mutations and grand promises of a future in which Jesus plays a major role.

Don’t get that tacky Christmas sweater out of moth balls just yet, says scripture during this season. There’s a lot to be done between now and the birth celebration. Advent’s watchwords are preparation and waiting, the season is about looking outward and ahead. It’s a season when we are supposed to be declaring to the

world that God’s previous incarnation and incursion into human affairs through Jesus Christ is not the end of the story but only the beginning, the foundation for a future hope of God bringing ultimate promises to fruition.

In our Advent 1B reading from Mark’s Gospel this morning, Jesus speaks with apocalyptic, end-of-time symbolism but he’s not speaking in a vacuum. We haven’t read it aloud today but maybe you want to go look at what has just transpired in the story earlier in Mark 13. Jesus has just left the Temple in Jerusalem and his students are awed by the massive stones and construction around them – Jesus tells them that the Temple would fall. “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars,” Jesus says in symbolic language, “do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

Remember, Mark’s Gospel is written in the middle of the 1st Century, not while Jesus is alive but while his followers are anxious and uncertain about their future. Jesus was executed more than 40 years earlier, the Romans conquered Jerusalem and literally destroyed the Jewish Temple in 70 CE. Mark is writing after Jesus is gone and the Temple is gone and Jews are once again scattered and without a center for their religious practice.

The Gospel here gives Jesus an opportunity to reassure Mark’s readers, these early followers of Jesus, still Jews but now without a central religious foundation, still hurting from the Temple’s destruction – that there is a future. They have seen the boulders fall and the smoke rise, they have seen the destruction wrought by the political power of the world, they have felt the crushing weight of societal collapse.

“But in those days, *after* that suffering,” note that this is after the suffering. For Mark’s audience the suffering is the destruction of the Temple – the world in which they live is *after*. Sometime after

now, says Jesus, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then [you] will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” And that’s good stuff – that’s, believe or not, good news for us. God’s coming in glory is not to bring destruction to the world but to bring consolation and salvation.

What to do, what to do? – during this time between the first coming – the birth of Jesus – and the second coming – the return of Jesus. It’s not a dead time, says Jesus, it’s an active time. And it’s the now time, the time once the suffering has passed, the now that requires our attention. It’s Advent each year. Advent is all about preparing to recognize Jesus. And waiting and watching for Jesus in our midst is not about passivity; Jesus’ words in this passage are supposed to lead us to readiness and alertness, not to patient, apathetic inactivity.

The message here is not just about waiting for another physical appearance of Jesus in the future, although some Christians emphasize that reading of the symbolism here, but it’s about patiently and watchfully focusing our attention on where Christ might be manifested today. The Jesus message here is about fully occupying the season – Occupy Advent.

The “Occupy” movement of the past few months has taken on many different aspects. And I know that all of you have different takes on what’s going on. I know I have mixed feelings about the movement. It’s not focused on one particular event or complaint – maybe that’s good, maybe that’s bad. It has a lot of different kinds of people involved – students, professionals, homeless people, union workers, clergy, teachers, police, etc – maybe that’s good, maybe that’s bad. It’s causing a financial drain on some municipal service budgets – maybe that’s good, maybe that’s bad. There are pros and cons about the whole thing.

But what I am certain about is that the horrendous actions taken by certain police and other governmental authorities cannot be tolerated in a just world – and during a season like Advent which is supposed to remind us that justice is at the root of the entire Jesus message.

Pepper spray in small quantities used in Manhattan in October, or the wounding of an Iraq veteran in the Oakland crackdown, or the pepper spraying of an 84 year old activist and pregnant 19 year old in Seattle, or the unbelievable, in-your-face, brutal pepper spray incident used against the University of California, Davis students last Friday. Authorities are handling the situations clumsily and I pray that the eviction notice issued for this afternoon at 5:30 in Philadelphia does not turn violent. Using violence to end passive resistance is absolutely not God’s justice – maybe it is the world’s retributive way to control perceived chaos – but it is not the Advent justice to which we are called. (And now, pepper spray used by a Los Angeles shopper on Friday who was trying to get to the new Xbox video game consoles before anyone else.)

Aside from all of that ... what I have realized about this movement is that it is truly about occupying. Occupy space, occupy the news cycle, occupy people’s attention, occupy conversation, occupy political debate, occupy issues and make them known, occupy what the wealthy in society consider their personal space. Occupy. When the movement was dragged out of Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park in the middle of the night, it filled up again the next morning. If the movement is forced from Dilworth Plaza tonight by the Mayor’s eviction notice, it will reform and occupy something or someplace else by tomorrow. “Occupy” is the message of the movement.

And I’ve come to realize that it’s the message if the Advent season as well. Occupy this time – this now – which follows the original coming of the Messiah. Occupy this moment and live out the message of the patient waiting for God’s continual in-breaking moments in this world. Occupy this season and join Jesus as he

calls for and points toward God’s justice for the downtrodden and disenfranchised and disinherited.

“Advent is dangerous,” writes Matthew Skinner, Associate Professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, “The impulses behind Advent should alarm those who are overly enamored with the current system (who probably number more than 1%), as well as any others who are overly confident in their ability to engineer what’s best for the world. Advent expresses the insistence that all is not right in our societies. That’s a dangerous expression. Stoking hopes for a new world order, for justice *really* to be for all, usually implies that old systems, governments, and loyalties aren’t what they’re cracked up to be.”

This Advent transformation is so monumental and all-encompassing and causes such upheaval in the present order that Mark’s Jesus has to use symbolism to explain it. It is symbolism which is not so familiar to us but would have been to the original audience. It suggests that, in the face of God’s desires coming to full existence, every other power – symbolized by sun, moon, and stars – receives notice and sees its light go out. No aspect of human existence goes untransformed when God enters in for good. This Advent transformation should shake us, wake us, and create in us an ability to claim for the world God’s power of justice and mercy. Reject the existing system of power – embrace the new order of God’s alternative, transforming, counter intuitive, and perhaps uncomfortable and irrational message.

God’s new order that we will hear proclaimed as we occupy Advent this year comes from the Prophet Isaiah over the next few weeks.

“The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. (Isaiah 65:25)

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain ... [God] will feed [the] flock like a shepherd; gather the lambs in [God’s] arms, and carry them in [the] bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:3-4, 11)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-11)

That is the Advent message that we must occupy this year. That is the “occupy” that is demanded of us in this between time. Occupy Advent, claim it as yours. Wait, prepare, proclaim, create and live God’s message of justice.

On this First Sunday in Advent we light the candle that we name “hope”, reminding us that not only is this a season of waiting and preparing, but it is also a season of hope because we know that God’s promise – unlike the fleeting moments of Black Friday sales – is solid and true. That God-Is-With-Us moment rings true so the truth of the quote on our Advent brochure becomes clear. “Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark,” says George Iles.

So let us occupy Advent this year and let us know that our faith does indeed hold out its hand for us – and in that moment, we are offered ... hope.

Amen.