

Advent 1B November 29 2020
Mark 13:24-37
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. Let's pray:

Our entry into the Season of Advent begins with these ominous sounding words, "In those days...". Advent isn't just the four-week liturgical season before Christmas on the church calendar. It's a reality of life. It happens in all sorts of ways and at various stages in life.

"In those days ... the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." Jesus is talking to his disciples. The disciples have been admiring the temple and the large stones. They're impressed. It gives them confidence and brings comfort. Jesus, however, is telling them that change is coming. The temple of their life will be destroyed (Mark 13:1,2; 14:58).

If you've ever experienced significant change in your life, whether pleasant or dreadful, you know about "in those days." You know about Advent. You know what it's like to enter the darkness of change. You see, we are insufferably, creatures of habit. We're most comfortable with set routines and we don't like change because all change, whether welcome or unwanted, brings some kind of loss. It may be the loss of a relationship, a loved one, a job; the loss of familiar places and things, freedoms and safety. When these disruptions occur, the world we knew previously no longer exists. Indeed, the events of 2020 will be spoken about as "in those days" and the future will present a new and different normal.

The Advents of our lives set before us challenges and struggles. How will we find our way forward when the beacons that usually light our path no longer shine? What do we do when it feels as though our world is falling apart? Where do we go when it seems that darkness is our only companion and God is nowhere to be seen?

The dark times of life make us uneasy. The temptation is to do something to fix it, to ease the pain, to escape the uncertainty, and get back to what used to be. The God of Advent doesn't allow that. We can never go back to the way it was before the lights went out. God doesn't undo our life. God redeems our life. Advent is more about the hope and coming of what will be than it is about the losses. That hope and coming is the Son of Man, Jesus, the Christ. The presence of Christ is the ultimate answer to every prayer, to every light extinguishing loss, to every Advent of our life.

Every time we tell our Advent stories, we echo the prophet Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1). And God does. God is faithful. God strengthens us to the end. In the midst of what we might consider loss, we lack nothing as we await the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:7-9).

The Advent times of life are times of expectant waiting. Like the expectant waiting of a pregnant woman - in Advent we live in between what was and what will be. We are neither here nor there. We are betwixt and between. They are times of transition and it's hard, sometimes even impossible, to see the way forward. Neither can we turn back. We find ourselves in the wilderness between Christ's death when the skies darken, the temple curtain is torn, the earth shakes and the rocks split; and, the coming of the Son of Man in clouds with great power and glory.

Still, if we allow them to, the dark places of life can draw us deeper into the divine mystery. They remind us that we don't know everything. We don't see all possibilities. We can neither predict nor control anything. We're not in charge. Advent challenges us to let go of our habits, to question our typical ways of seeing, to let go of the tiller. Advent invites us to trust that God will come to us in the darkness of life. Advent invites us to receive the God who comes to us in the valley of the shadow of death.

At some point our world falls apart, life changes, or the lights go out. We think we have reached our end. When these things happen, Jesus tells us to remember the fig tree. Read the signs correctly. When its branch becomes tender and it puts forth leaves you know summer is near. So also, when the darkness overtakes your life, trust that the Son of Man is near. Christ's presence, our healing and salvation, are always taking place in the dark and messy parts of life. We will never be abandoned to the darkness.

"Be alert," Jesus cautions. He commands us to "Keep awake." Darkness isn't our enemy. Falling asleep is. We fall asleep whenever fear controls our life, when hope gives way to despair, when we equate busyness with goodness, when we replace thanksgiving with entitlement, when we choose what is comfortable rather than life-giving. Whenever we think our life is over, that darkness is our final reality, that we have been abandoned, or that loss and darkness are our only reality, then we have fallen asleep.

Too often we allow the darkness to deceive us into believing there's nothing worth waiting or watching for. So, we close our eyes. We fall asleep and we become part of the darkness. We refuse to see Jesus who's always coming to us. Our problem is that when darkness threatens to engulf us, we don't give our eyes time to adjust. We don't trust our night vision - the light of Christ that is within us, a light that can never be extinguished.

The Advents of our lives ask us to trust Jesus more than the darkness. It means we must sit, listen, wait, watch. That's not what most of the world believes or what our society rewards. We must keep showing up and be present in the darkness of life, even though it's hard to do. The alternative is to run away from our darkness; to run away from where God meets us.

In the darkness of Advent we must slow down, listen more than we speak, ponder questions rather than answers. We must wait expectantly but without specific expectations. Waiting in darkness is an act of faithfulness and surrender to the Coming One. We wait and watch by staying awake, by praying, by struggling with the call of God to follow the way of Jesus; the way of the cross and death.

Whether we live to see the Second Coming of Christ or die and meet Christ face-to-face is rather immaterial. The Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory. Then 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 (Mark 13:26-27). Either way, the Glorious Festival of Life, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, is coming for you. Our waiting becomes our prayer and it will be answered by God's presence.

Tell your Advent stories; stories of change, loss, darkness. Then sit down and practice Advent. Be still. Be quiet. Listen. Watch. Wait. Why? Because God "works for those who wait for him" (Isaiah 64:4). Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.