

Advent 1B 03 December 2023
Mark 13:24-37
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus says], *'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come... Keep awake.'* Let's pray ... Amen.

The painting on the screen behind me is called, "The Last Judgement" by Rogier van der Weyden. It was painted for the Hôtel-Dieu, the Hospice of God, in Beaune, France, and covers an entire wall in the large hospital ward. The hospital was founded in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of Burgundy, as a hospital for the poor, and survives today as a museum.

Apparently, the beds were positioned so that the patients could see the painting from where they lay. In the centre, is Christ with the Archangel Michael. This isn't the gentle, kind, nice Jesus we usually think of; but, Christ the Judge. Michael is holding scales to weigh the sins of those rising from their graves. The righteous are joyfully entering into God's kingdom; the damned, to everlasting torment. The painting was intended to warn the sick and dying that they should prepare for judgement.

We don't preach much on the subject of God's wrath these days. We confess in the Creeds that "[Christ] will come again to judge the living and the dead", but we don't labour the point so much. And for good reason, which will become obvious later.

All of the major religions of the world have a sense of judgement beyond this world. Christianity and Judaism teach the doctrine of a Son of Man who will come in the clouds to judge. Our Gospel text for this first Sunday in Advent is clearly patterned after [Daniel 7] where the prophet says: "As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was

given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed” [:13,14].

Christians; we, believe this human being, the Son of Man, is none other than Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, died and was buried then rose again and ascended to glory. This Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, our Lord and Saviour, will come again to judge and to save.

And, it's not only the biblical religions which have a judgement day. Muslims believe that when someone dies the angel of death comes with God's judgement to take them to either paradise or hellfire. Hindus, Buddhists and other Asian religions are less afraid of death than eternal rebirth. Whether someone is reincarnated as a cockroach or a cow, a rat or a royal, is determined by their actions on earth. Any misdeed can send one plummeting down the food chain, just as an act of kindness can elevate one's status in the next iteration of life. In this view, Nirvana, or eternal nothingness, is barely a dim hope for most of humanity.

Some scholars believe the idea of judgement is at the heart of Jesus' message. They call him an eschatological prophet or one who preaches and teaches and prepares people for the day of wrath to come. They see today's passage of warning and comfort from Mark as the climax to this perspective. God's judgement is coming, Jesus says, so be prepared. Watch for the signs which will be clear to those who see them. They're much like the signs of Daniel—portents in the heavens and on earth, suffering and tribulation. The sun will be darkened and the moon and stars and powers of heaven shaken. The Son of Man will come on the clouds to gather the elect from every tribe and nation to save them. The judgement will come soon, Jesus says, but even he doesn't know the day or hour of judgement. What he does know is that the end will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night - perhaps in the evening, at midnight or cockcrow or dawn. The people must watch and pray and be ready at all times for that awful day.

Now, there are some useful attitudes that can develop from this view, because it's true that none of us know when our life will end. A story:

An elderly gentleman was travelling alone on a railway carriage. He looked steadily out the window, drinking in every sight—houses, trees, clouds, and children who watched the train go by. “It’s all so beautiful,” he remarked to the stranger beside him. “Look at that wagon load of hay on its way to the barn.” Sensing that the other person thought him a little strange, the man added, “You see, my doctor told me that I only had three months to live. Ever since, everything has looked so beautiful, so wonderful, so important to me... I feel as though I’ve been asleep all my life and have finally woken up to this world of wonder.” To appreciate and cherish each moment of our lives is a blessing and a healthy, joyful way to live.

Sadly, an over emphasis on judgement can lead to unhealthy and unnecessary anxiety. According to a legend, a traveller wandered deep into an enchanted forest. In an opening, he found a sundial. On the sundial were the words, “Stop traveller. It is later than you think.” Rather than adventuring along with childlike innocence, enjoying the enchantment of the forest, not worrying about what tomorrow might bring, we can be lured into and confronted with thinking about when our last day comes – “It is later than you think.” Are we ready? Shadows loom over us. God won’t be mocked. As we sow, so shall we reap. There’ll be a day of judgement. We’ll appear before our Maker and our Judge. What we’ve said or done; what we’ve neglected to do or say will be called into account. It all sounds ominous and threatening.

The problem with fixating on the last day, the day of judgement, the day of wrath, whatever you want to call it, is that your brain gets tricked into believing there’s something you can do about it. You get lured into a downward spiral of thinking you can do something about your salvation, that you can contribute in some meritorious way to God’s acceptance of you. Do you see the trap here? Your salvation becomes based on what you do, think, and say. To this, I have only one question: How can you ever be sure you’ve done enough good to earn a ticket to heaven?

Let me knock this way of thinking on the head straight away. You’re not good enough! Neither am I. That’s true for all of humanity. Within ourselves, there’s nothing that we possess that can make us more attractive, redeemable, or valuable to God. “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22,23). We need Jesus!

So, instead of getting all worried and knotted up into a ball of anxiety, let's look for the grace and comfort in this message. Who is the judge? Jesus, who loves us and comforts us and promises never to leave us or forsake us. Jesus, who died for us. In Christ, we have the forgiveness of sins and everlasting salvation.

Saints, always remember what is known as the "Great Exchange." We exchange our sinfulness for Christ's sinlessness. Our evil deeds are recorded in God's great judging book, but they're blotted out with Jesus' blood shed on the cross. We're not saved by our own goodness, but Christ's. We're reckoned righteous because of Christ's righteousness not our own holiness. There's nothing we have done or not done, said or not said, thought or not thought that can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ [Romans 8:39]. Our regrets, our guilt, our shame, our remorse aren't too great to be forgiven by Christ.

God's promise encourages us to look forward to Judgement Day with the same excitement and longing that children are now looking forward to Christmas. They're counting the days until they can open the gifts under the Christmas tree and we too can look forward with the same excitement and anticipation to the day when Christ will come again to save.

What God's kingdom will be like we don't really know. Scripture only provides glimpses of something wonderful beyond our current capacity to comprehend. We have Christ's promise that he has gone before us to prepare a place for us in the Father's house of many mansions [John 14:2]. We know that Christ will be there with and for us, just as he is with and for us now [Matthew 28:20].

It's our faith, the gift given at our baptism, that says no matter how dark the night, the morning will surely come and with it a blessed reunion. The day of judgement will be for us, for all who believe in Jesus Christ, a great awakening to a world of wonder. In the meantime, we wait, watch, and pray, for the saving Lover of our souls; Jesus Christ. To him be all glory, honour, and praise! Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus, whom has already done all things necessary. Amen.