

First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2020
The Rev. Kelly Moughty
Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring Va.

Gracious God, may only your word be spoken and your Word be heard. Amen.

I always think it's important to begin with honesty and transparency, so I have a confession to make to you all.

I am not a morning person.

I am not very good at waking up. I really wish I was, but I generally only communicate in grunts and half sentences until I've quietly walked my dog and had a cup of coffee. You want proof of miracles? My husband is still married to me despite all that early morning grouching. I am not my most graceful or grace-filled first thing in the morning.

And so for a person like me, this morning's gospel reading about waking up and staying awake feels a little pointed.

Biblical scholars often refer to the 13th chapter of Mark as Mark's "Little Apocalypse." In our contemporary culture, we tend to use the word apocalypse to describe the end of the world, or a large scale catastrophic event. It evokes a disaster movie - maybe something starring Ben Affleck and involving an earthquake.

But that's not how people in Mark's time understood the word apocalypse. It comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which actually means "to take the cover off," to uncover something, to reveal something.

So to use the word "apocalypse" in a Biblical sense, it's not about the end of the world, it's about the end of the world as we know it. Something new has been revealed, and as a result, we can no longer live our lives in the same way.

And what's happening in Mark's Little Apocalypse is that Jesus is revealing something, is showing something, is teaching something to his disciples. And this conversation is happening on roughly Wednesday of the first Holy Week.

It seems strange that here, on the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year, the season when we are preparing ourselves for Christmas, we are assigned a reading about Jesus teaching during Holy Week, about Jesus preparing the disciples for Good Friday.

We're supposed to be getting ready for the birth of Christ, and instead this reading gets us ready for Christ's death... and what happens after Christ's death.

But in the end, I think this strange juxtaposition of a Holy Week story at the beginning of Advent - I think it works, because fundamentally Christmas and Easter have a lot in common. Ultimately, incarnation and resurrection are about the same thing - new life. Both Christmas and Easter are about new life, new possibilities, about the ways in which God is breaking into God's creation in new ways.

In our Isaiah reading this morning the prophet begins with a plea to God, "*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*" And God did.

Again and again scripture tells us that God tore open the heavens, that God crosses the boundaries between heaven and earth, and breaks into our world. God broke into the world that first Christmas, and again at Jesus's baptism, and again at Christ's Transfiguration on the mountaintop, and again at the Resurrection, and again Pentecost. Over and over again, God breaks into our world and pulls the blinders off our eyes, God takes the cover off. God comes and reveals a new thing to us.

Now, I gotta tell you, most clergy who are brand new to a call do not want to preach on the apocalypse on their first Sunday. It's generally not the first choice reading. But this year it feels completely appropriate, because if the year of our Lord 2020 hasn't felt like an apocalypse, I don't know what possibly could.

The Covid-19 pandemic has drawn back the curtain, it has revealed, and is forcing us to confront so many things about our world. Economic inequality. Racial inequality. Inequality in the availability of health care both domestically and internationally. Inequality in the educational opportunities provided for our children and the ramifications of that on working families.

In the year 2020, the hits just keep on coming, and not in a good way. It leaves us feeling anxious and burnt out from constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, from trying to predict what could possibly happen next. All of those pre-existing inequalities have been starkly revealed during this time. And all of this waking up has been absolutely exhausting.

As a society, we are not very good at waking up. We are not at our most graceful or grace-filled. And in our bone-deep exhaustion, the last thing we want to hear right now is an instruction to keep awake. Especially when it's not entirely clear what we're supposed to be waiting and watching for.

"But about that day or hour, no one knows" Jesus says in Mark's Little Apocalypse. *"Neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,"* he continues. It's a remarkable moment, because Jesus is essentially saying that he's not quite sure what's coming. And if Jesus doesn't know, and the angels in heaven have no idea, then maybe we can cut ourselves a little slack for not having the future figured out yet, for not understanding yet the full implications of our particular apocalyptic moment.

About that day or hour, no one knows, so keep alert. In other words, neither you nor anyone else knows what's coming next, so your best bet is to be present to the moment.

And that? That is really, really hard. When the world and the news and your kids and your job are all pulling you in wildly different directions, staying present to the moment can sound like a luxury preached only by new-age gurus and yoga instructors. But here it is in Mark's Little Apocalypse, a deep wisdom found on the lips of Jesus Christ himself. *About that day or hour, no one knows, so keep alert.* No one knows about the future, so pay attention to the now.

It is a remarkably liberating message. Especially when you pair it with St. Paul's words to the Corinthians that we heard this morning. Because Paul assures us of two things. One is that God is faithful. And the other is that we as Christian community are not lacking any of the spiritual gifts that we will need to meet the moment when it comes. God has already given us the tools for when that moment arrives, whatever that moment ends up being.

We just need to stay present to this moment, and in this moment, to look for the signs.

And Jesus gives us a hint about how to do that too - the lesson of the fig tree. *Look for when the branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves.* The sprouting of a branch could be an easy thing to miss if you're not staying present to the moment. But what are those tender new leaves a sign of? New life. That tree or bush is growing and living its life in a new way.

New life. It is the heart of both the Christmas and the Easter messages. New life. New possibilities. New ways in which God is always trying to break into our world and offer us a different way of being, a way of being that better honors the image of God that is in each of us.

I believe that if we are present to the moment, and pay attention to what brings new life for ourselves and others in each moment, then that is a kind of compass. A compass where God's promise of new life is the true north. And if we follow that compass, if we choose to move toward that which is authentically life-giving, we will never be led astray, because God is faithful.

It's the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year. God is doing something new in each of our lives, and in our life together as the Church of the Holy Cross. We don't yet know what it's all going to look like, but I am so excited that we get to discover it, moment by moment, together.

May God bless us on that journey this Advent, and always.
Amen.