

"Christ Will Come Again"
December 2, 2018

Mark 13:24-37

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Hayward United Methodist Church

Advent Reading and Candle Lighting
Prayer of Invocation

**Lord, Open us to all that you would have us be, for you and for others.
'Breakthrough' into our lives and our church with new possibilities. Amen.**

The Word

In those days, right after that time of suffering, **"The sun will become dark, and the moon will no longer shine. The stars will fall, and the powers in the sky will be shaken."**

Then the Son of Man will be seen coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will send his angels to gather his chosen ones from all over the earth. **Learn a lesson from a fig tree. When its branches sprout and start putting out leaves, you know summer is near. So when you see all these things happening, you will know that the time has almost come.**

You can be sure that some of the people of this generation will still be alive when all this happens. The sky and the earth will not last forever, but my words will. **No one knows the day or the time. The angels in heaven don't know, and the Son himself doesn't know. Only the Father knows. So watch out and be ready! You don't know when the time will come.**

It is like what happens when a man goes away for a while and places his servants in charge of everything. He tells each of them what to do, and he orders the guard to keep alert. **So be alert! You don't know when the master of the house will come back. It could be in the evening or at midnight or before dawn or in the morning.**

But, if he comes suddenly, don't let him find you asleep.
I tell everyone just what I have told you. Be alert!

Living the Word

Today we begin advent: a time of waiting for Christmas to come; a time to prepare; a time to hope that the waiting will be over and Christ will come again to bring 'Peace on Earth.' All I want for Christmas is stability, warmth and full bellies for all. My hope is that Christ will get here soon to get this world back in order...

Today's scripture, near the end of the Gospel of Mark, is Jesus telling about what it will be like when he comes back to earth again. He has told us that he will come again. We know that the Jewish people were oppressed when he was on earth the first time, and here he speaks of more oppression to come before his return.

But it doesn't let us in on when that return will happen. It is futuristic but we don't know when. As we read these words we can know how God works, in ways beyond our understanding and in mystery. Who are we to know the mind of our Creator? What we can know is that we are all called to watch and wait...While we wait we can and should be holding to the hope we can gain through prayer, worship and living as Jesus did – like a servant to others.

From the standpoint of the historical Jesus, "the son of man, coming in the clouds" sounds like a continuation of the resurrection. After resurrection from the tomb, Jesus ascended into heaven, but before he left, he told the disciples he would return in a similar way.

Forty years later, when Mark put the story, the gospel together, those people would have heard a commentary on their lives under Roman oppression, the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. They were looking for Christ's return at that point.

From our standpoint today, almost 2000 years have passed and it hasn't happened yet. Jesus says "I tell everyone just as I have told you, be alert!" He is talking to all of humanity until he returns, not just to the people of that time period. This tells us that the information is recyclable for new scenarios though time.

The basic message of Christ's futuristic speech is this: The rebellion against the sovereignty of God is strong, as the wicked oppress the blameless. Things will get worse before they get better. But hang on just a little longer, because when you reach the point that you feel you cannot endure any more, God will intervene to turn the world right side up. Be alert, and hold on to hope.

So is Jesus coming or not? We can look at the second coming in more than one way. The first way is that Jesus will return in the end times. Futuristic or 'apocalyptic' to use the bigger word, sounds like science fiction, but then God can do what humans can't. How can we be alert for so long? By remembering – once a month, in the communion liturgy, we say together: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." Do you believe it when you say it? What would that mean for you that Christ will come again?

The Apostle Paul, who only knew Jesus through the other disciples, thought it was an urgent message – as Jesus would return soon, or at least in his lifetime. One example of this is his encouragement of his followers "*I'm telling those who are single and widows that it's good for them to stay single like me.*" Paul believed that there was no time for anything other than focusing on getting the good news of Christ out to people before it was too late. The word of witness that Paul shares with us may be urgent. Just because we have waited all these years and Jesus hasn't returned yet, doesn't mean it can't happen at any time. Are you alert to this possibility?

The first word I say every time at a Funeral or Memorial Service are "Dying, Christ destroyed our death; rising Christ restored our life; Christ will come again in glory." We believe that someday Christ will come and we keep reminding ourselves so we can be alert for it.

Let me give you a second way to understand the coming of Christ: Hospice nurses Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley share their intimate experiences with patients at the end of life, drawn from more than twenty years' experience tending the terminally ill. They describe a phenomenon they term "Nearing Death Awareness"--which resembles somewhat the near-death experience sometimes reported by individuals revived after being clinically dead.

Nearing Death Awareness, however, develops slowly, and the dying person seemingly drifts for a time between two worlds. Attempts by the dying to communicate about this awareness, often expressed in symbolic language or gestures, may be misunderstood by those around them, who dismiss the expressions as mere 'confusion.'"

According to the authors, dying messages fall into two categories: descriptions of what they are experiencing (such as the places they see, the presence of others no longer alive, or their knowledge of when death will occur) and requests for what the dying need for a peaceful death (a reconciliation, for instance, or the removal of some barrier to departure). We all have heard of seeing or heading toward 'the bright light.'

In the Gospel of John 14:1-3, also used often at a funeral, *"Don't be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too."*

In death, Jesus says that he will prepare a place for us and return, or come, to get us. Remember the basic message that Christ has left us with: The rebellion against the sovereignty of God is strong, as the wicked oppress the blameless. (Have you ever felt this in your life?) Things will get worse before they get better. (I have had those times in life.) But hang on just a little longer, because when you reach the point that you feel you cannot endure any more, God will intervene to turn the world right side up. Be alert, and hold on to hope.

From the Gospel of John 12:23-25 *Jesus replied, "The time has come for the Human One to be glorified. (he is talking to the disciples about his own death.) I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. (Anyone who works a garden or a field of grain, knows the truth of this.)*

Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever. (We were not meant to live forever. Those who can face death when it comes, seem to die easier. Those who can process that death is a part of life, live not in fear, but in hope for whatever adventure God has planned next.)

That chapter continues with a third way to experience the coming of Christ for us to consider in verse 26: *"Whoever serves me must follow me. Wherever I am, there my servant will also be. My Father will honor whoever serves me."* Whenever we serve, as Jesus served, he comes to be with us. Christ is here and now, as we feed and clothe those who are going without.

I began by telling you that 'All I want for Christmas is stability, warmth and full bellies for all. My hope is that Christ will get here soon to get this world back in order...' It is possible that I need no longer wait for Christ to arrive, but to acknowledge his ever presence and 'get to work' with him.

We witness, sharing the good news of Christ's presence by our servant hood actions, some of which are:

- Ringing Bells for Salvation Army, or putting something in the bucket when we go by.
- Giving loose change and buying gifts for Operation Christmas so that children can know the love of Jesus through Christmas gifts from people they may never even meet.
- Bringing hats and mittens for the children at St Francis Mission, because we know how thankful we are to have warm heads and hands and we know that everyone who needs them should have them.

- Giving to the Food Shelf through dollars and cans of food and volunteering. Giving whatever you have to share so others can have a portion of what you are blessed with. Getting the word of need out to the community and encouraging others to help also.
- Putting our change together each Sunday so we can buy a water buffalo or two for someone we will never know, yet who will be able to feed and support their family in a new and practical way.

All year as we collect the offering, I try to remind us that we should bless as we are blessed. At Christmas there is always an extra push from all directions to get our money.

But there are extra blessings as well, in working with Christ in this time of anticipation and the celebration of our Savior's birth. Be alert and know the hope in blessing others, while working alongside Jesus.

What if Jesus won't return in the clouds until we 'get it'? What if he is waiting to see if we understand that he is always with us, willing to help us bring stability of life to all! This is what Advent is about - looking for the Coming of Christ in ourselves and in others. A futuristic Coming of Christ; an end of life Coming of Christ and an already here, waiting to be asked to join us, Coming of Christ.

What we believe as Christians and United Methodists is written into the hymns that we sing. One of my favorites is "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light." In the third verse is a line for this morning: "I'm looking for the Coming of Christ; I want to be with Jesus." Have a hopeful Advent...