

The Reverend Matthew Hanisian  
Advent 1B  
St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church  
December 3, 2017  
Mark 3:24-37

**Mark 13:24-37**

*Jesus said, "In those days, after that suffering,  
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 they will see 'the Son of Man coming in 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.*

*"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. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

*"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. It 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. Therefore, 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."*

"And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

As we celebrate the church's New Year's Day today, these images of the end of the world, of the sun darkened, stars falling from the heavens and the powers of the world literally shaken, run headlong against the commercialized and secular spectacle that has become the lead up to Christmas.

Now before we get too much into, "Put the Christ in Christmas" let's stay for a while where we start this morning: the season of Advent. Advent means "coming." For Christians, Advent is a season before Christmas to set aside time for quiet, for reflection, for hopeful anticipation a time for us to prepare for the birth of Jesus into the world.

Yet, In Mark's gospel this morning this hopeful anticipation for the birth of the savior of the world is juxtaposed with Jesus preparing his disciples for what will come next in his life and their ministry together: his death and resurrection.

Jesus and the disciples have just come into Jerusalem not more than a handful of verses previously. At the beginning of chapter 13, the disciples are enthralled with the scale grandeur of the Jerusalem temple. Caught

up in the moment they exclaim to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (13:1). And, in typical Marcan fashion, Jesus' immediate response is to tell them about the temple's coming destruction 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' (Mark 13:2).

Our passage from this morning goes on to state that when the Son of Man returns, nothing will remain. Both heaven and earth will be spoken of as things that once were, but the promise of God's eternal word will remain.

Mark's theology always asks us: Where is God to be found...where does God show up? The answer is not in the glorious temple, but in a manger; not with the rich merchants in the busy streets of the city, but outside the gates with the beggars; not with kings and queens in their palaces, but out in the wilderness.

There is a constant juxtaposition of new life out of death; dying to the old ways of doing things to be reborn; tearing down that which is fading away in order to respond to the "behold I am doing a new thing" of the Holy Spirit's leading...even Jesus dying on the cross to give us all life eternal.

You see Mark is quite keen on theological irony: The word—which we hear and then is no more—will last, while the temple in Jerusalem will be utterly destroyed. Out of Jesus' suffering and death will come the eternal and everlasting Messiah. That instrument of Roman torture and death, the cross, will become the symbol for everlasting life; and, the savior of the whole world, for whom we now wait, will take the form of a baby born in a manger.

At the heart of things, the apocalyptic language of Jesus this morning reminds us that like discipleship, incarnation is a risky business indeed. The stark real-ness of the words Jesus speaks, the urgency and stern warnings to "keep awake" cut right through any sentimentality we have about this time of year or about our savior, Jesus. You'll recall that even his most trusty and faithful followers, the disciples, have a hard time with this command to stay awake as Jesus prays in the Garden before he is taken and crucified.

Jesus commands us to stay alert, keep awake because we do not know when he is going to return. As Professor of New Testament Mark Powell from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus put it: "In today's church, many Christians seem to think, 'Since the time of Jesus' coming cannot be known, we need not think much about it.' Mark draws the opposite conclusion: since the timing is unknown, we should think about it all the time.

Powell goes on to wonder, "But does anyone actually think that way? Does anyone go through every day, wondering at morning, noon, and night if *now* is the time that someone long gone might return? Yes. People who are in love do that."

God is doing the extraordinary. Here and now. God is moving in and through St. Martin's, and in and through all of the many ways we take the eternal Good News of Jesus out into the world that will pass away.

Into the world where grass withers and fades away, where rulers battle for control of peoples and lands endlessly, into the world where everything lives for a season but ultimately decays and dies, our God chooses to be born—chooses to be in this mess. Emmanuel, God WITH us, even until the end of the ages.

On further reflection, perhaps the dissimilarity of Jesus' words in Mark and the present reality of our commercialized Christmas is, in fact, the point. I see signs that our society has become more and more let down and unfulfilled with our disposable-everything lives making it all the more important for us to appreciate the pillars in our lives that are long-lasting; to seek out those who have left a mark on us, who have touched the very fabric of who we are...revealing more clearly God's everlasting presence in our lives and helped us become who God created us to be.

More and more I am convinced that God is calling us to change the world through our words and actions, and in turn, to be changed by that experience.

The past couple of days I have spent some time in the Narthex and behind the screen of my computer in my office. I've looked through hundreds of images of St. Martin's. Mostly they are taken from a distance that makes it difficult to see what exactly is going on or who is even involved in the doing. Yet the images clearly show a community of people the St. Martin's community doing something with each other, for each other and for others...doing things that show we care about taking God's eternal words of Good News and making them tangible. Sometimes that doing even involves shaving cream in great quantities.

Today, along with it being the first Sunday of Advent, today we celebrate the in-gathering of our Responses to God's generosity to us. We give thanks to God for all that God has done for us and in our lives. We give thanks to God for both the wonderful things that happen in our lives, the "blessings," but also for those difficult things that happen in our lives, as A General Thanksgiving on page 836 of the BCP states, we even give thanks, "For those disappointments and failures that lead to acknowledge our dependence on you alone." BCP p. 836.

Part of that thankfulness is what we give back to God. [Example of Lou Rudinski's Offertory Plate] Giving back to the person who gave you the wood in the first place. Today we celebrate the giving back a portion of "our" treasure to God. We acknowledge that money, wealth, health, our very lives are fleeting, but that the work of God in Christ, the promise of God's eternal word is everlasting and gives us—and all those to whom we minister—new life. Grateful lives. Lives that lead us to even greater generosity because we have been so generously blessed by God in the first place.

The gifts we bring forward in a moment, are our contribution to the ongoing work of Jesus in the world. We are charged to not stay stationary, but to move, to grow, to thrive. Our gifts will help that to happen here in this place, hopefully enabling us to do more, to find new ways to deepen our faith in Jesus and to find new ways to enable the very in-breaking of the Kingdom of God.

This Advent we are called from the very start to keep alert. To keep awake. We are to awaken as from sleep and look with new intensity, with fresh eyes and new anticipation for the presence of God even as we wait for the second coming of Jesus. Who could come at any moment. Even right now.

The ministries we perform, the lives we change, and how we are changed mean nothing if we do not open our eyes to recognize and acknowledge the presence of the divine in our midst.

Jesus says: "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." Keep awake to God's presence in your lives, keep awake to how you can be that presence in someone else's life. Keep awake to watch and wait during this holy season of Advent and give thanks to God for loving us so much...for the Christ child who will be born for us and who will be the savior of the world.

AMEN.