

WAKE UP CALL

MARK 13:24-37

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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We've just heard a disruptive and disorienting text from Mark's gospel. As I was thinking about this yesterday, it occurred to me that it fits rather well with the general state of disruption and disorientation in our own building as our construction project begins.

There's lots going on as Advent begins this year!

I want to begin with a story that a clergy acquaintance shared on Facebook this week. He talks about someone he knows who:

relies on Handel's musical masterpiece Messiah to get him through this time of year. Though it was originally conceived as more of a Lent and Easter composition, in many ways, it's pitch perfect for this time of year, at least the first section of it, which begins exactly where we begin each Advent... with the longing for the coming of the Messiah.

[I]t's not uncommon to see this friend driving around his town blasting the Messiah at full volume, him singing along, and playing that oft-overlooked instrument in an orchestra's percussion section – the steering wheel.

Unfortunately this year, when he dusted off his old CD of the Messiah, it was scratched beyond playing and beyond repair, so he went looking for another copy. Now, I don't know if you've ever tried to locate an actual CD in today's retail market instead of just downloading it to your smartphone, but it's increasingly difficult and takes a rather wise man to find one... He ended up at the mall, he found a store that still had a decent selection of CDs, and started searching through the racks.

Eventually, a store clerk came up to him and asked if she could help him.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m looking for the Messiah.”

<Pause>

“Excuse me?” she replied.

“I’m searching for the Messiah,” he repeated.

“Well, sir, I think you’re looking in the wrong place.”¹

It’s a funny story because of the double meaning we associate with it. But of course “looking in the wrong place for the Messiah” is a hazard every year around this time.

As soon as December rolls around the Christmas marketing machine takes over with all of its kitsch and nostalgia. Our thoughts are easily turned toward presents and lights and Santa and harmless images of sweet, harmless baby Jesus in the manger.

It’s easy for the Advent season to come and go, and we realize that we’ve been looking in the wrong place and in the wrong ways for the Messiah.

That’s why I think it’s good that each year, Advent begins with a bang.

Every year, we are jolted into Advent with an apocalyptic reading from one of the gospels. This year it’s Mark who provides a wake up call at the outset of the season.

Why, you might be wondering, does a season that we tend to associate with joy and peace always begin with the end of the world?

In reading passages like this we locate ourselves in the same place as the people of Israel before the first coming of Christ: as those who are waiting for God to come.

The people of Israel had been waiting, expecting, longing for God to act, to send a Messiah to right the wrongs of their people.

¹ David Henson, story told on Facebook, accessed December 2, 2017

Jesus was the fulfillment of those hopes, albeit an unexpected one!

Today's text at the beginning of Advent reminds us that we are in a similar position.

Not an identical position—we know more of God's purposes because we have a vision of Christ's first coming. We know who it is that will come again and what his coming promises.

Our waiting has a specificity to it that the people of Israel prior to the coming of Jesus didn't have.

But, like them, we long for God to come in power. Like them, we long for God's will to be finally done on earth as in heaven.

The Advent season is not just a kind of benign prelude to celebrating Christ's first coming. It is meant to stoke the fires of our longing for Christ to come again and to be found faithful when he does.

The reason is obvious enough.

You may have noticed that even though God became one of us two thousand years ago, even though Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God, the world is still kind of a messed up place.

Things are not as they should be. Death still haunts our steps. Violence and injustice are still rampant. We still find the path of love a far more difficult choice than the path of self.

Yes, the incarnation is important. But it didn't fix everything.

Our lives are lived in the tension of the kingdom of God being both now and not yet. We have glimpses and foretastes—times when we see glimpses of Christ and his way here and now.

Advent is when we are supposed to pay attention to the not yet. We're still waiting.

We still need Christ to come again.

In this context, we need texts like this to remind us that when things seem to be falling apart, God is near.

The language in Mark 13 is cosmic in scope—stars falling from the sky, the heavens being shaken. This language is meant to symbolically point to the earth-shaking effects of Christ's coming.

But, for most of us this seems pretty remote. We're not thinking about the literal end of the world. We're just trying to get through this one!

Everywhere we look, people's words seem to be falling apart.

Just yesterday I encountered someone in the course of everyday life. I didn't know them well, but they knew I was a pastor. A simple, "How's it going?" led to a forty five minute tear-stained conversation about a marriage that was falling apart, about betrayal, and longing, and anger, and fear for the future.

Another person asked if they could drop by this week for a "quick chat," and left two and a half hours later after lamenting everything from the state of the world to the corrupt nature of politics to their employment prospects.

A few months ago, I was being driven home by the courtesy car driver where my van was being serviced, and the guy found out I was a pastor.

(This is always a potentially dangerous piece of information for a stranger to possess. 😊)

He proceeded to tell me that God was about to purify the world with wind and fire.

The shootings in Las Vegas had just happened. There had recently been a story out of Edmonton where another angry man turned a van into a weapon. And of course it had been a fall season full of earthquakes and hurricanes and fires.

But the more I listened to this guy's story, the more sympathetic I became. He had lost his wife to cancer. He had been left with four teenagers on his own. He had lost two other family members almost immediately after. He had been on the point of a mental breakdown. He told me he felt like he was being "spiritually terrorized, like Job."

I could only shake my head at what he had endured. No wonder he felt like the world ought to get around to ending. His had certainly seemed to be.

I'm sure you could make your own list of people in your world whose worlds are falling apart. Maybe you feel powerless to help.

Maybe at the outset of this Advent, *you* feel like things are falling apart. You need God to come. You need God to fix what you can't fix. You need a hope for a future you're struggling to even imagine. You need a peace that passes understanding.

You need a passage like Mark 13—an apocalypse to remind you that sometimes it is when things feel most disrupted and dark and disorienting, that God is most close at hand.

It's easy—for some of us, at least—to roll our eyes at those whose explanation for the badness of things in the world or in their lives is to imagine that Jesus' return is right around the corner. Christian history is, unfortunately, littered with those who were convinced that they knew the day and the hour, despite Jesus' warnings to the contrary.

But on one level, this reaction has some truth to it.

At its most basic level, the longing for Christ to come again is an acknowledgment that we need him.

Advent gives us a stretch of the Christian calendar to simply say, "Come, Lord Jesus. We need you. We've made a mess. We don't know how to fix this."

On Friday night I went with a friend to a concert at the Geomatic Attic. It was a good show—just three guys and their guitars and a packed room.

But the one guy, in particular, kept talking about how the world was in such a bad place, and about how we didn't know how we were going to get ourselves out of the messes that we have made.

My friend kind of rolled his eyes and said, "Man, this guy is morbid!"

(Maybe you're thinking the same of me, as this sermon draws to a close!)

Anyway, he proceeded to launch into a song about whether or not love was enough.

As I stood at the back of the room, I had what was perhaps an improper thought. I think we were supposed to be thinking, "Of course, love is enough."

But I was thinking, "No, love alone *isn't* enough." Not any love that we can conjure up, at any rate. Human love is too small and selfish to fix all that is broken.

But the love of God? The God who *is* love? The God who has come and will come again? The God who invites us to live as emissaries of the kingdom that is coming?

That's enough. That's the hope that we enter into at Advent. That's the wake up call that texts like Mark 13 offer us.

David Henson, the guy I mentioned at the beginning, puts it well:

And so what a relief to come here and enter not into the Christmas season, but into Advent, a season that honors the somberness some of us might be feeling, the complicated mix of memory, expectation, pain, absence, and longing for something better than the suffering and sorrow of this world.

In the midst of suffering and the profound feeling of a world or our lives falling apart, of the wheels coming off, we peer into the promise of a future that is different, a future where wars and rumors of war are no longer. **We stake out sacred ground that the fracture we feel is not the end, but the beginning of all things in which God gives birth to a world in which the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth finally and permanently become one.**

My prayer is that we would look for the Messiah in the right place this Advent season. That we would anticipate and celebrate his coming as a baby in a manger, the child of the promise, the one in whom the hopes and fears of all the years would be met.

But that we would also be awake and watchful for his coming in glory, to right the wrongs of history, to usher in the peaceable kingdom, to judge and redeem, to transform the "not yet" into the "now."

Amen.

