

He Will Strengthen You to the End

Mark 13:24-37; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin, on this first Sunday of Advent 2020, with a conversation I had in the summer of 2017. Some of you remember this summer very well. For those who don't, it wasn't pretty.

The news was dominated by hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and the Caribbean, an earthquake in Mexico, monsoon floods in southeast Asia.

It was also the summer of the wildfire that ravaged our own little corner of southern Alberta, destroying parts of Waterton National Park, which is a sanctuary for many in our church.

I remember it well. For large chunks of August and September, the skies were dark and foreboding. The wind was menacing and omnipresent (or at least so it seems, in my memory). It felt almost *apocalyptic*.

I had a conversation with a young man one weekend that summer. We were talking about Hurricane Irma and the path of destruction it was presently carving across Florida.

He asked me if I had heard about the reason why the hurricane had been downgraded to a "category 3" and had avoided a certain area in Florida. I told him I had not.

He informed me that it was because a group of people had gathered on the beach, held hands, and prayed.

I sighed (inwardly) and smiled (outwardly). A predictable litany of responses began to assemble in my brain.

So, God "answered" people's prayers by sending a slightly less violent and destructive storm than he had previously intended? Were there not people praying in the category 4 parts?

What about all the parts of the world presently not in the eye of the storm—were we to imagine that people are more pious in the places that got off easy?

Do we really believe that God actively and personally directs the weather?

What kind of God waits for an appropriate display of devotion or prayer before restraining himself?

I looked at this young man so full of faith, so alive with passion, so utterly convinced that he knew what God was up to in the chaotic events of that summer.

And I envied him. I wished that God really did behave as he seemed to think God did.

That fervent prayer would bring rain to douse the fires, that pious devotion could stem the tide and turn back the storm, that proper reverence could protect those we love and keep them healthy.

I often wish God worked like a formula where you just plug in the right variables and watch things turn out in a predictable and orderly way.

Alas, the world is not a safe place. The world has never been a safe or predictable place. We have certainly been reminded of this in 2020.

Whether it's the weather or war or famine or a global pandemic, to be a human being has always been to live under threat.

We know this. We know that storms come, and waters rise, and fires spread, and diagnoses come, and disaster strikes, and viruses rage, and death comes.

God is, apparently, less concerned about our safety than we are.

Or, perhaps a better way of saying it would be to say that God is concerned about more than our safety.

If to be human is to live under threat, then perhaps we should always be at least attempting to move from the very natural question “How do I avoid what is threatening me?” to the much more difficult, but in the end probably better question, “What does it look like to live and love and hope well under threat?”

What does it look like to “take heart” because somehow Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33)?

And, more specifically on this first Sunday of Advent, what does it look like to be prepared and to wait with anticipation and hope for God’s coming among us?

I used the word “apocalyptic” to describe how the late summer of 2017 sometimes felt.

Our text from Mark this morning, along with its parallels in Luke 21 and Matthew 24-25, is often referred to as the “Little Apocalypse.” It contains images of darkened skies and stars falling from the sky.

But the word “apocalyptic” is not just a word that we drag out of our mental cupboards when things get really, really, *really* bad.

The word “apocalypse” literally means “unveiling,” or revealing something that has been hidden but is now being revealed.

Apocalyptic literature was a well-known tool, often of those in powerless positions, which used highly symbolic language and metaphors to talk about the meaning and theological significance of earthly events.

So when Jesus talks about the “the sun being darkened” and the “moon not giving its light” and stars,” about the Son of Man coming on the clouds (a figurative expression going all the way back to Daniel 7), these are all symbolic and metaphorical ways of saying that coming events in Jerusalem, and his “enthronement” as king on Calvary’s cross will have cosmic effects that will reverberate throughout the world.

N.T. Wright makes this comparison:

I have often pointed out to students that, to describe the fall of the Berlin Wall, as one well might, as an “earth-shattering event” might perhaps lead some future historian, writing in the *Martian Journal of Early European Studies*, to hypothesize that an earthquake had caused the collapse of the Wall, leading to both sides realizing they

could live together after all. A good many readings of apocalyptic literature in our own century operate on about that level of misunderstanding.¹

The imagery in the first part of our gospel text this morning is a symbolic way of describing what would happen in the immediate context of Jesus' death and resurrection (not the literal end of the world, as many Christians have supposed).

That's why Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (Mark 13:30).

But it remains a strange and unsettling text.

Last Sunday, on Christ the King/Eternity Sunday, I said that as Christians, our lives are not to be governed by the fear.

And yet, the little apocalypse on the first Sunday of Advent is kind of a frightening passage! Why read a text like this, especially at a time like now?! Don't we have enough to be afraid of?

This text and texts like it show up on the first Sunday of Advent every year for two very specific reasons:

1. To remind us that as Christians we are living in between advents.
2. To remind us to be watchful.

The apocalyptic imagery referred to events in the first century, but the call to be watchful is a timeless one.

Because Christ has come, Christ will come again, and Christ comes to us still, in the meantime, between Advents.

Each year during the season of Advent, we talk about "waiting for the Christ child," and this is good. Advent *is* a season of anticipation, and it's good and important for our hearts to prepare room for the Christ child, Immanuel, God with us.

¹ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 282.

But as Christians, for whom Christ has *already come*, as those who are constituted as a people by that first coming, the season of Advent is a time when we are reminded that we now wait not for Christ's *first* coming as a child, but for Christ to come in glory.

This is the coming that we now look forward to with gladness and anticipation during the season of Advent.

But the command to be watchful and attentive as we wait is never separate from the deep truth that God is at work within and among us to help us as we wait.

Paul's words in our second reading from 1 Corinthians are a simple reminder that whatever things might look like at any given moment in the story of the cosmos or in the story of our own lives, God has equipped his people for the in-between time of waiting, and it is God who will preserve and sustain us.

This is true, regardless of how things might look or feel.

The church to which Paul addressed these words was not full of perfect people whose faith was unshakeable and solid.

It was a church full of mixed up, ordinary, sinful people not unlike every other churches that have existed since then.

And despite this situation, Paul begins his letter with a powerful affirmation of who these people are because of what Jesus has done:

- You have been enriched *in every way* with all kinds of speech and knowledge (1:5)
- You do not lack *any* spiritual gifts (1:7)

In other words, even though it might not look and feel like it, you're already well equipped to wait and to live faithfully in the waiting.

You have the Spirit to guide and sustain you. You have knowledge of the purposes of God and where God's story is going.

And then, the most important point: He—Jesus Christ—will strengthen you (keep you firm) until the end (1:8).

The point for Paul is not the quality of the Corinthian church (or any church, including ours) but the sufficiency of the promise of God.

Paul will go on to write some very strong words to this church. But here, at the outset of what will be a rather harsh letter, Paul reminds his hearers of these two foundational truths:

1. You are recipients of grace—you have what you need to live lives of faith, hope, and love while you wait
2. It is Jesus Christ, not your own efforts, who will keep you firm in between his comings.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we are called to pay attention to Christ and to wait for his coming in faith, hope, and love.

So much of the Christian life is about waiting properly.

This pandemic is perhaps training us to wait, much as we might prefer to avoid this lesson!

Can we embrace this time of waiting as a gift and to recognize that Christ has gifted us—with “all kinds of speech and with all knowledge... with every spiritual gift”—to wait well?

This year, we enter Advent in highly unusual and even distressing circumstances. Pandemic fatigue is setting in (or has well and truly *already* settled in!).

Maybe your expectations are low as Advent begins. Perhaps you find it difficult to believe in the God who comes—that God has come or is coming to fix this broken world.

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.

Perhaps you are feeling more hopeful. If so, praise God!

However you are feeling on this first Sunday of Advent, I pray that we would all take the words from our passage this morning to heart.

- You have already been gifted and graced to wait expectantly.
- Jesus Christ is the one who will keep you firm until the end.

May we have ears to hear and eyes to see so that we recognize the time of God's coming to us.

God is not predictable. God does not work like a formula that we can plot out with precision. God enters our stories and the big Story of our world in disruptive and counterintuitive and shocking ways.

Who would have ever predicted anything like a manger? Or a cross?

May we be challenged and disrupted and unsettled and watchful for God's coming this Advent season.

May we wait and live expectantly, hopefully, and faithfully for the God who comes to us as the Lord of history to transform us and to transform the world he loves and for which he died.

Amen.

