

Mark 13:24-36; Isaiah 64. Jervis. Dec. 2017.

I expect that if you have come to this church even once before, you will know that we think that following and understanding Jesus is not easy. Well, today it gets even harder.

The first Sunday in Advent, indeed the beginning of the Christian year (happy new year) – only a few weeks away from the magical, warm and fuzzy Christmas eve and Christmas day.

And the first Sunday in an Advent tinged by rumours of nuclear war, and other unsettling things. We just want a safe and comforting few moments in our week.

And what do we hear - Jesus talking about a cataclysm of such proportions that the most stable and regular things in the world – the regularity and comfort of the sunrise and moonlight - will end.

“The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken”

Jesus talking about the order of the cosmos as people in his time conceived of it – there are stars in heaven, there are powers that keep everything ticking along as we have always known – Jesus talking about the stars falling out of heaven and the powers in heaven shaking.

And after the destruction of the world’s order – when everything is in darkness - Jesus says he is going to come from heaven in clouds with great power and glory and send out the angels who will bring together the elect from the far corners of heaven and earth

Wow! Spend a bit of time meditating or imagining that vision. Into a world gone dark and disordered, Jesus the Son of man descends from way up high, powerful and glorious. And ‘the elect’ – the word means ‘those who are called’ - who have been scattered hither and yon,

perhaps by the great cataclysm – the elect get gathered in by the angels. Presumably made safe and secure in a new world order.

If this fantastic scene is not hard enough to fathom, Jesus can't seem to answer the obvious question – when will all this happen?

He says this will happen after the suffering he has just described.

In the verses before today's passage Jesus talks about nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes and famines, persecution of believers, people living without homes and in terrible tribulation.

Jesus will descend after these things. But, as we heard today, Jesus can't get more specific about the timing of the Son of man's – Jesus' descent into the darkness in great glory.

He says it is as hard to tell when this is going to happen as it is to tell the precise moment that summer comes – the precise moment when the branches of a fig tree have grown tender and begun to bud.

And Jesus goes on to say that no one knows the day or hour, neither the angels in heaven, nor he himself, but only God. But, he says, he knows it is going to happen soon. "Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place."

And he commands his disciples several times to be on the alert; to be awake. Not just to wake up but to be in the state of being awake.

On the first Sunday of Advent – particularly the first Sunday in *this* Advent - couldn't we just relax a little?

We know that in Advent the church wants us to have bifocal vision – seeing the wonder of Jesus’ birth in the manger (Jesus’ first coming, the first Advent) in light of our expectation that Jesus will come again (the second Advent).

But, couldn’t we just look forward to that second coming, which nobody knows the time of; which Jesus himself seems confused about and probably mistaken about [it didn’t come in his generation after all] – couldn’t we look forward to the second Advent in a general, vague, abstract kind of way. Like we do when we say by rote Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again?

Couldn’t we just relax a little, especially we who work so hard for justice; who have our own personal sorrows and cares; and who are living in such an anxious time.

Well, of course we can, if we choose. And maybe I wish this morning for my sake - and maybe for yours -that I felt free to tell you to ignore Jesus’ strange and unsettling words. They come from a foreign worldview that science and intellectual progress has proven now to be defunct. They are in the past and we are in another, more advanced and sophisticated time.

But, many of you know me well enough to know that I can’t with integrity stand before you and encourage consigning the Bible to the past. Even though I may not understand what it means. And I admit to you that on this passage, I take solace from the great interpreters of scripture who recognize that there are some Biblical passages that are truly beyond our understanding.

Thomas Cranmer, for instance, one of the 16th century architects of Anglicanism, in a sermon exhorting people to read and learn holy scripture, said “As for the dark mysteries of scripture, every person’s duty is to be contented to be ignorant in them until it pleases God to open these things unto him.”

So, in what I hope is a spirit of humility and faithful exploration, I invite you to meditate with me on the mysterious words of Jesus that we hear today.

These words are in Mark's gospel – a gospel that, unlike the other three gospels, ends without a scene in which we see the risen Jesus.

Mark ends with the women coming to the tomb and finding not the corpse of Jesus but a young man in white telling them "Jesus is not here, he is risen." Then the young man directs the women to tell his disciples and Peter to go to Galilee where they will see him.

The final words in the best manuscripts of Mark are, "the women went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had overwhelmed them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It is a strange ending – an ending without closure. An ending with nowhere else to go except back to the beginning of the gospel, where Jesus makes his entrance in Galilee. To look for Jesus in Galilee as the young man in white directs the disciples. An ending that invites, even impels us to reread the gospel. To keep looking for this absent yet present Jesus. He is risen, but he is not here.

An ending that affirms both the presence of the risen Jesus and his hiddenness.

And if we accept the invitation to read and re-read the gospel in search of the risen Jesus, we experience the life of Jesus in layers of time.

After the first few times of reading it, we know the events of Jesus life, we know what he said and what happened to him, even while we are reading the narrative sequentially. After the first time, we don't experience the events in Jesus life as we would if we were reading a murder mystery.

While we read about Jesus' temptation, in our mind we also see Jesus' healing miracles, Jesus' calling of his disciples, Jesus' passion, and so on. It is similar to the experience of going through the church year. We experience Christmas Eve overlaid by Good Friday, overlaid by the glorious service we celebrated last week, the Reign of Christ – Christ risen and ascended and Lord of the cosmos.

And if we have been able to go through several, even many church years, it is not only particular festivals in one church year that overlay the one we are celebrating, but the many complete cycles overlay the one we are in.

Time experienced sequentially – events coming after each other; but also all at once.

Reading and hearing Mark's gospel is a bit like the experience of the cycles of the church year. In fact, some have suggested that the composition of Mark is innately liturgical; that Mark may have been structured in order to be used in liturgy.

So, like our experience of the church year, when we read Mark, while we focus on one passage, all the others are there at the same time. There are layers of time – both historical time and narrative time.

After all, Mark writes after the resurrection about what Jesus said before he was crucified and raised; by virtue of this, in the gospel we already have two layers of historical time superimposed on each other – the time of Mark and the time of Jesus. And we are hearing them both at once.

And Mark, being the special kind of writer he is, knows how to pull us into the narrative of Jesus in a way that encourages us to recognize the overlapping of past, future and present.

In the passage we heard today Jesus talks about descending on clouds of heaven into a dark and disordered world at a future point in time; but we also know that Jesus has already descended into a dark and disordered world when he appeared in Galilee at the beginning of the gospel, and that in Mark's narrative Jesus is about to descend into the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane where he will ask his disciples several times to be alert, to stay awake.

And all of this is overlaid on the hope in Jesus' and Mark's (and our) scriptures – the hope we heard today in Isaiah:

Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

I hear Mark acknowledging the hiddenness of the good news he proclaims – he starts his gospel with the ringing announcement - the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ son of God. He ends in silence – 'they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid'.

Mark does not make the gospel easy for us. He asks us to believe that the elusive Jesus is God's Son who is raised and present with us, and who is going to again descend into the darkness and gather us up.

I understand Mark's method of unveiling the hiddenness of Christ to the first timid disciples – and to us – to be to ask us to spend time in the story of Jesus. To live alert – to be expectant for an event that will be revealed to us as we are immersed in the layers of time in his gospel.

This is not a call to be like a dog chasing his tail; circling around and around endlessly with nothing gained.

It is a call to live within and from the density of the life of Jesus; Jesus' life as our gravity. So that as we repeatedly read the gospel, pray with the gospel, hear the gospel, Jesus' elusive presence becomes more tangible and powerful for us.

Without that repetitive and nourishing engagement with the good news of Jesus Christ, we might hear his words about coming again spoken to a situation of desperation. As if his coming will be like the coming of a rescue ship to drowning people. People not only awake, but frantic, terrified. People desperately looking on the horizon, panicking for salvation.

Instead, if we hear Jesus' word overlaid and undergirded with the entire good news of Jesus Christ son of God, our alertness for his second Advent is grounded in the serenity of the knowledge of the faithfulness of God. A faithfulness we have witnessed in God's sending Christ the first time.

Isaiah says at the end of his plea for God to tear open the heavens and come down – “you have hidden your face from us, Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.” Isaiah's response to his desire for the hidden God to tear open the heaven and come down is trust. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the work of your hand.”

Mark's gospel invites us to look ahead for Christ to come again and to do so from within the many layered story of Jesus in which we see God's unimpeachable, irrevocable faithfulness to us: In descending into the darkness that our egos and greed created in God's world; in God's faithfulness in giving us prophets through the centuries, in giving us God's own Spirit and God's own Son.

And so, from the rich ground of the good news of Jesus, as we live forward towards the light of God, we may with the serenity of faith obey Jesus' plea that we keep alert; awake to where now the risen Jesus is being born, where he is on the cross and where he descends into our darkness.

I was reminded this past Wednesday at a mid-week service celebrating the climax/ the end of the Christian year – the Reign of Christ, like we did here last Sunday; I was reminded of a poem by Minnie Louise Haskans.

It became famous because King George 6th used it in his Christmas address in 1939 on the eve of the second world war. That context gave the poem's words particular power. But, I think its words are fitting for the celebration of the first and second Advent in any year.

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East."

At the beginning of this Christian year, I wish you all a wonderful prayerful, gospel filled Advent.