

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus speaks about the signs of his coming – darkened sun and moon and fallen stars – and encourages his followers to watch the signs and be alert. Then he tells a story about a man who goes on a long trip, leaving his servants with work to do, and telling the gatekeeper to keep watch for his return. In the same way we are to keep watch for we don't know when the Master will return. This passage certainly relates to the war which arose from the Jewish uprising of 66CE - gives an apocalyptic picture of a world in turmoil to which Christ comes, and from which God's people are rescued. This rescue is not so much an escape from the struggle as it is an experience of God's presence and protection in the midst of it - although the image of harvest is often interpreted (unhelpfully) in "evacuation" terms.

“But 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.”

COCU 1B Advent 1B RCL Readings

And so the church year starts again, and as usual, we begin with the end – the vision of God's reign consummated in Christ. To be fair, though, Mark's Gospel does not give us a vision of some future second coming of Christ so much as it gives us a vision of the events that the early church had to navigate as they witnessed the might of Rome crush their nation. Whether we speak of a vision of God's reign in the midst of the turmoil of the past, or a vision of God's reign coming in the midst of the turmoil of the future, the essential message remains the same – God is always coming to us, and the world's turmoil does not stop us from knowing and experience God's reign right here and now. It is the hope we have that God is at work in our world that gives the security, the grace and the strength to live faithfully as followers of Christ and to make our contributions to the world's transformation - and it is this hope that Advent Sunday offers us.

GLOBAL APPLICATION: There is a growing sense that our systems – economic, political, military, international, educational and medical – must change. That an acknowledgement of how the systems we have built have brought harm and suffering on most of the people in our world, and a commitment to change. There is also a constant cry for us to be more conscious as human beings - conscious of our place in the interconnected world, conscious of the consequences of our actions, conscious of others and how their needs intersect with our own. There is also a growing call for a greater spiritual consciousness - an greater awareness of the call of God to serve and love one another, and to honour the way God has come to others who are different from us. Finally, there is the growing sense of the need for healthy, life-bringing spirituality - a healthy awareness of God's grace and compassion, and of God's saving presence which is always coming to us - in our world. This Advent Sunday is an amazing opportunity for us to take stock of our faith, our lives, our compliance with broken systems, and our work for justice and change, and commit to being agents of God's coming - God's reign - where we are. And underlying all of this challenge is the hope we have in Christ - that God is working in our world with purpose, and that we are participants in bringing the reign of Christ into reality in our world. May we have the grace and the humility to do this important re-evaluative work. *(Commentary on the lectionary texts by John van de Laar, Sacredise)*

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

A plea for God to reveal God's glory and come to God's people to turn them back to God, to make God's face smile on God's people, and to save them.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim
and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

**Restore us, O God; let your face shine,
that we may be saved.**

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's
prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them
tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our
neighbours; our enemies laugh among themselves.

**Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.**

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom
you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

**Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may
be saved.**

Isaiah 64:1-9

*A plea for God to come and display God's might as in the past. Also, a
confession that, while God welcomes those who do good, God's people have
not done good, and have failed to confess. Finally, a plea for forgiveness.*

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the
mountains would quake at your presence - as when fire kindles
brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name
known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your
presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you
came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past
no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God
besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those
who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you
were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous
deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities,
like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are
our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work
of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not
remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

*God has given us every spiritual gift, and will sustain us and strengthen us, as
we await the return of Christ.*

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our
brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those
who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all
those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you
because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,
for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and
knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been
strengthened among you - so that you are not lacking in any spiritual
gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also
strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of
our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the
fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

*It is extremely sad that the Christian view of Christ's coming has come to be
seen as something that is filled with terror, destruction and a God who uses
the violent and dominating methods of human dictators to accomplish God's
ends. While popular publications and movies may glorify this way of seeing
God's reign, it is certainly not what Christ had in mind, and it doesn't help us
to experience or reflect God's grace in our communities either. This year
Advent calls us to think differently about the coming of Christ - as a gracious,
restorative event that is always happening, and which gives us a cause for
hope, not fear. Yes, there is the need for us to change - to repent - but all
growth and healing requires this.*