

“Beware, Keep Alert”

Isaiah 64:1-9 • Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 • 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 • Mark 13:24-37

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First Sunday of Advent

Welcome to the season of Advent! We are starting the church year all over again. It is the beginning of the sacred story of our redemption and salvation in Jesus Christ, with the promise that *he is coming*. He is coming *here*, to *this* earth, to *these* people, yes, to *this* church. It is the story we tell year after year, because it is central to our identity, to *who we are* as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ. It is the story that leads to Christmas, with Christ’s Nativity, but it doesn’t stop there! It continues on through Christ’s Epiphany and Christ’s Baptism to Christ’s Triumphal Entry, Christ’s Last Supper, and Christ’s Crucifixion, then to Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension and his glorious Reign. We tell this story year after year, the sacred story of our redemption and salvation. That story begins and ends *today*. For this first Sunday of Advent is the one day in the church year when we look in two directions at once. We look *backwards*, as we begin again to tell the story of Christ’s *first* coming; and we look *forwards*, remembering the truth that, at some point in the future, Christ will come *again*.

There are two “comings” of Jesus Christ, two *arrivals* here on earth, two *Advents*. The word “Advent” means “Arrival” or “Appearance.” We make a mistake if we think there was just *one* Advent of Jesus Christ, if we think that “Advent” is solely about what happened *in the past*. It is also, very much, about *what is yet to come*. Advent invites us to look back with grateful appreciation for what God did *in the past* when Jesus came to earth the *first* time. Advent also invites us to look *ahead*, with expectation and hope, to what God will do *in the future* when Jesus comes to earth a *second* time.

Today’s Gospel reading is focused on that *second* Advent, the one that is yet to come. As Jesus and his disciples walk out of the Temple in Jerusalem, one of them exclaims, “What large stones and what large buildings!” Jesus responds: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” That is precisely what happened, forty years later, in the year 70, when the Romans destroyed the city and burned it to the ground. To this day, you can see some of the massive stones that Roman battering rams smashed and crashed onto the street below.

Four decades earlier, Jesus was sitting with four of his disciples on the Mount of Olives, looking at that magnificent city of Jerusalem, and they asked him for more information. “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Jesus doesn’t pinpoint a specific year. But he does tell them that, before the end comes, there will be many false Messiahs, there will be “wars and rumors of wars,” “nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” Ominously, he adds, “This is but the *beginning* of the birth pangs.” The disciples will be handed over to councils and beaten in synagogues; they will “stand before governors and kings” on account of Jesus “as a testimony to them.” Before the end comes, “the good news must first be proclaimed to all the nations.” It will be

a grim time: “Sibling will betray sibling to death and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” There will be a “desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be.” That “desolating sacrilege” harkens back to the Book of Daniel, where the same phrase was used to describe a pagan altar and a shrine to Zeus that was set up in the Temple in Jerusalem by a Greek king nearly two hundred years before Jesus. Jesus is saying that something similar will happen again, and Mark, the gospel writer, adds a parenthetical note: “let the reader understand,” which suggests that the very first readers of Mark’s gospel would have been able to identify that “desecrating sacrilege.” Perhaps it was a statue of the Roman Emperor Caligula that Caligula ordered built in Jerusalem in the early ‘40s, although that statue was never built because Caligula died. More likely, it refers to the sacrilege that happened to the Temple when the Romans plundered and destroyed it in the year 70. If you ever go to the city of Rome, visit the Arch of Titus, right near the Roman Forum, and take note of the relief panel depicting Romans carrying off the holy objects from the Temple. It appears that Mark lived through the horror of those days, and makes a reference to it here.

Jesus goes on to say that sometime after all 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.” He follows this with a quotation from the book of Daniel: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” Jesus seems to be describing some kind of great apocalyptic event that will disrupt the entire *cosmos* – an event impacting absolutely *everything* that God has created – followed by the coming of the Messiah. That is, himself. Obviously, this hasn’t happened yet, and there has been a tremendous amount of speculation as to when this event might occur. Scientists are capable of making reasonable estimates of how long our own sun or other stars in the universe will endure, based on a significant amount of data collected through research and observation; it appears that our sun has about five billion years of life left before its core runs out of hydrogen and it begins expanding into a red giant. That’s far enough away that I’m not going to worry about it! Of course, God could choose to intervene before then, and various Christians through the centuries have come up with various “predictions” based on their interpretation of key Bible passages. Many of the earliest Christians thought it was going to happen in their own lifetime; it’s clear from some passages in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, that some Christians were already confused about when the end would come. Many were assuming that it would happen in their own lifetimes, because Jesus had said “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” Several notable theologians from the early centuries of the church predicted that the world would end and Christ would return in the fourth or fifth century, or in the year 500; some later theologians predicted dates in the 700s and 800s. Many Christians expected it to happen 1000 years after Christ’s birth; then, when that didn’t happen, some revised their estimates to 1000 years after Christ’s *death*. That date, like so many others, came and went without incident, and then there was a long period without many predictions. But by about 1200 Christians were making predictions again, often revising them when their dates proved to be inaccurate. When the plague called the “Black Death” spread through Europe in the 14th century, many took that to be a clear indication that the “end times” were at hand and Christ must be coming soon. A hundred million people, or maybe twice that, died from that devastating plague in just seven years, but the heavens and the earth endured, and the Messiah didn’t come, and Christians continued to make predictions. Martin Luther, John Wesley, Cotton Mather, and many, *many* other Christians since then have continued to predict it would happen in specific years; in recent decades, that list has included the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, and many others. Every single person or group I have just mentioned, and countless others, has been wrong. Often people

have issued revised dates after the year they predicted came and passed without the world ending and the Messiah returning. The Presbyterian Church generally avoids this kind of speculation, as do many other branches of Christianity that have been around for a long time, like the Catholics, the Orthodox, and the Anglicans. We affirm without equivocation that Jesus Christ will indeed return “to judge the living and the dead,” but we do not attempt to estimate when that will happen. For Jesus himself said, “about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.” So his message to the four disciples that were sitting with him that day on the Mount of Olives – and his enduring message to us today – is this: “Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come.... 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.” It could happen today, or tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or next year, or next century, or a thousand years from now, or a hundred thousand years from now, or a billion years from now, or a hundred trillion years from now – which is roughly when scientists think new stars will no longer be being born. It’s really a question of whether, and at what point, God chooses to intervene in the natural progression of the universe. That’s *God’s* business, not ours. There are plenty of people alive today who think things are *really bad* right now and that the *end times are at hand*; what you need to know is that *countless* Christians have said the same thing in very different times and circumstances over the course of the last two thousand years. *It really doesn’t matter* what people predict. That shouldn’t make *any* difference in how you are living your life *today*.

So the second point of Jesus’ teaching is this: “Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come.” The first main point is that *he will come back*. Just as surely he came once to this earth, two thousand years ago, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, so too will he come back a second time. Why? For what purpose? He says that the Son of Man “will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” He is coming back to *gather his elect*. Who are they? Whom will he gather? The “elect” are the ones whom God has *chosen*, the ones whom God has *picked*, the ones whom God has *selected*, to receive eternal salvation. We don’t get to know who those people are. We aren’t given a specific list. Oh, we can make some educated guesses. I think we can pretty safely assume that Christians who embody the kinds of characteristics and traits that are lifted up again and again in the pages of the New Testament probably meet the criteria. We can pretty safely assume that anybody who earnestly strives to follow Jesus probably meets the criteria. But the truth of the matter is that nobody is perfect, and even the most hardened criminal is capable of repenting. At the same time there are plenty of people who go to church who really aren’t trying to follow Jesus in any meaningful way, while there are also people outside the church who embody the values and teachings of Jesus far better than many so-called Christians. The contours of “who’s in” and “who’s out” is really for *God* to decide, and we would be wise not to make judgments about other people’s ultimate fate. That’s *God’s* business, not ours.

So here we are, on this first Sunday of Advent, and I’m talking more about Christ’s *second* coming than his *first*. Maybe you may want me to launch right into the stories of Jesus’s birth. Hang on, we’ll get there; Advent is about *patient waiting* and *hopeful expectation*. It’s about *preparing ourselves* for Christ’s coming. Advent is really *not* about getting all your Christmas shopping done. That’s a different set of tasks. The *primary* task for you to work on in Advent is *getting yourself ready for the coming of Christ*. If there are things in your life you need to straighten up, *now* is the time to do that. *Now* is the time to remember that Jesus could come back *any day*. Maybe even before Christmas gets here! Don’t be so busy getting ready for *Christmas* that you forget to get ready for *Christ*.

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