

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 29, 2020 – ADVENT 1, YEAR B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Past, Present, and Future Hope*”

St. Mark 13:24-37 (Keep alert; the Day of the Lord is at hand)

As we begin a new Church Year, we turn to the Gospel of Mark. The themes of waiting, and of preparation for Christ’s second coming that we’ve heard in Matthew’s Gospel these past few weeks are now presented more emphatically on this first Sunday of Advent, with Jesus’ warning, “Beware, keep alert” (Mk. 13:33).

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is responding to a question that Peter, James, John, and Andrew have asked about His prediction that the Jerusalem Temple would be destroyed (Mk. 13:1-4). Christ’s words are filled with Old Testament apocalyptic references, including earth-shattering events, that will occasion the Coming of the Son of Man “with great power and glory” (v. 26). Yet these celestial signs and images of destruction are only a prelude to the final consummation of God’s kingdom.

Jesus knew that His ministry signaled a new intervention by God into the affairs of this world, and He wanted others to perceive it, as well. And so, Christ compares the signs of the times to a fig tree, saying that just as the seasons of nature can be predicted when the tree puts forth new growth, so too, the signs of cosmic collapse and social turmoil will foretell that His return is near. As in the other Gospel lessons we’ve been hearing for several weeks, we are reminded that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and that we must prepare for His coming, and live in readiness to receive Him.

While the Gospel prophesies God’s climactic intervention in history, in Isaiah 64, verse 1, we find an actual appeal for God to intervene: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ...!” This text is a lament by the Israelites who returned after the Exile to find their land desolate and their Temple destroyed. The image of the quaking mountains in verse 3 recalls Mt. Sinai, where God was present and Israel was liberated. The prophet’s hope is that “awesome deeds” will once again be witnessed by God’s people, as, throughout the ages, the Lord alone has brought salvation and deliverance.¹ He alone is our true source of hope, past, present, and future!

The Christian hope is that God, and only God, will finally overcome all evil as it exists in us—personally, socially, economically, and politically. Advent declares that God’s rule of perfect justice and love will not come in history, but at the end of it.

However, this “hope of glory” does not exempt us from faithful living in the present. In the words of the late Bishop William Frey, former president of Trinity School for Ministry, “Hope is the melody of the future: faith is the courage to dance to it today.”²

And so, as we live out our daily lives in the anticipation of Christ’s return in glory, I believe that our Lord also invites us to look for the many ways He comes into our lives and hearts, here and now, to perceive with our *spiritual* eyes how Jesus comes among us without all the apocalyptic fanfare and global cataclysm—how He manifests Himself to us gently, quietly, and with humility.

Jef Olson, a Methodist minister from Minnesota, tells a story told about a little boy who decided he wanted to find God. The boy figured his search would probably require a long trip, so he decided to pack a lunch—four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer.

He set out on his journey and went a few blocks until he came to the local park. On one of the park benches sat an old woman looking at the pigeons.

The little boy sat down beside her and watched the pigeons too. When he grew hungry, he pulled out some Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him, so he offered her one. She accepted it gratefully and smiled at him. She had the most beautiful smile in the world. Wanting to see it again, the boy opened a can of root beer and offered her the other one. Again, she smiled that dazzling smile.

For a long time the two sat on the park bench eating Twinkies, drinking root beer, smiling at each other, and watching the pigeons. Neither said a word. Finally, the little boy realized it was getting late, and he needed to go home. He started to leave, took a few steps, then turned back and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was even more incandescent than before.

When the boy arrived home, his mother noticed that he was happy, but strangely quiet. “What did you do today?” she asked. “Oh,” he answered, “I had lunch in the park with God.” Before his mother could reply, he added, “And y’know what? She has the most beautiful smile in the world.”

Meanwhile, the old woman left the park and returned to her home. Her grown son noticed something different about *her*, too. “What did you do today, Mom?” he asked. “Oh,” she said, “I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God.” And before her son could say anything at all, she added, “And y’know what? God’s a lot younger than I imagined.”³

For all we know, Jesus may be among us as an old woman or a young boy, for He is present wherever there is unselfish love and genuine compassion. He is with us in every sacrifice made for a righteous cause, in the face of all who are in need, in every heart that comes to repentance, and in that sacred space between earth and heaven as a Christian lays dying.

In Luke 17:20-21 (NLT), a Pharisee asks Jesus, “When will the Kingdom of God come?” Christ replies: “The Kingdom of God can’t be detected by visible signs. You won’t be able to say,

‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ For the Kingdom of God is already among you.” The New Testament Greek for “among you” also means “within you,” or “within your grasp.” We don’t have to wait to until the heavens darken and the stars fall, or for trumpet blasts amidst billowing clouds of angelic hosts, to see Jesus coming among us. We are to look for Him in every kind and gracious soul, and in each person who is hungry, homeless, sick, in prison, or in need of love and care.

The 18th-century Bible Scholar Matthew Henry commented on today’s Gospel: “See how little Christ values outward pomp, where there is not real purity of heart. He looks with pity upon the ruin of precious souls, and weeps over them, but we do not find him look with pity upon the ruin of a fine house. Let us then be reminded how needful it is for us to have a more lasting abode in heaven, and to be prepared for it by the influences of the Holy Spirit, sought in the earnest use of all the means of grace.”⁴

That’s an old fashioned way of saying that on Judgment Day: God won't ask what kind of car you drove, He'll ask how many you gave a ride to, who didn't have transportation. God won't ask the square footage of your house, He'll ask how many people you welcomed into your home. God won't ask about the designer clothing in your closet, He'll ask how many you helped to clothe.

God won't ask how high your salary was, He'll ask whether you compromised your character to earn it. God won't ask how many friends you had, He'll ask how many to whom you were a friend. God won't ask what neighborhood you lived in, He'll ask how you treated your neighbors. God won't ask about the color of your skin, He'll ask about the content of your character. And God won't ask why it took you so long to seek Salvation, He will just lovingly escort you to your mansion in heaven, far from the gates of Hell.

Because Jesus is with us here and now—in our neighbors, our loved-ones, our fellow Christians, and the poor and needy—and because He has promised to return to us personally, with great glory and power, ours is not a hope for a God “gone away” but an *endless* hope. Because of this, we stand together as hope-bearers in a despair-ridden world—particularly in times like the present—offering the only answer to this world’s most profound need.

Twentieth-century Cardinal Leon Jozef Suenens wrote: “I am a man of hope, not for human reasons nor from any natural optimism, but because I believe the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church and the world even when His name remains unheard.”⁵

For us, Advent is about proclaiming His Name and the hope it brings, as we go forth seeking the face of Jesus in all we encounter, and meeting each one with the merciful love of Christ. Amen.

¹ Adapt. “The Coming of the Son of Man,” *Synthesis: Advent 1, Year B (2011)*, p. 1

² Adapt. H. King Oehmig, “Dancing to the melody of the future,” *Synthesis: Advent 1, Year B (2011)*, p. 4.

³ Adapt. Jef Olson, “Hearts Burning Within,” (source unknown).

⁴ Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary, [Biblos.com](http://biblecommenter.com/mark/13-1.htm) <<http://biblecommenter.com/mark/13-1.htm>> 27 November 2011.

⁵ Adapt. H. King Oehmig, “Not for any human reasons,” *Synthesis: Advent 1, Year B (2011)*, p. 4.