

# “Anticipation”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – November 30, 2008*

First Sunday of Advent

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

This chapter of Mark is known among biblical scholars as “the little apocalypse.” While our culture often defines apocalypse with war and destruction, it literally means “the revealing, the uncovering.” It is, for the people of God, the time when God becomes fully known and when God’s word can finally be understood.

This chapter comes after Jesus’ dramatic entrance into Jerusalem – riding on the donkey to shouts of Hosanna – and before the final string of events leading up to his death and resurrection. Already in this chapter, in this dialogue between Jesus and the people of Jerusalem, bold statements have already been made: the most shocking of which is that the great structure of the Temple – a massive symbol of God’s presence among them – will one day collapse: that not a single stone will be left standing.

Before Jesus departs from his disciples, he tells them about the final days when God’s glory will be truly revealed. The signs around us will be unmistakable, Jesus says, not because someone declaring to have special knowledge has declared that the time has arrived, but because the creation will give witness to a whole new reality: the things of the earth that we think are unshakeable will be leveled before our eyes.

Contemporaries of Jesus would have had no reason to believe that within a couple decades, the Temple of Jerusalem would, in fact, lie in ruins. After a failed revolt by the Jews in 66 CE, the Romans became sufficiently fed up and brought massive destruction to the city of Jerusalem and its holy places. Mark would have written these words right about the same time the Temple fell at the hands of the enemy. It seemed as if Jesus’ warnings had come true and that – before long – the sun and moon would go dark as well; the stars would fall from the sky and the end of the world would be at hand.

*(Read scripture)*

Almost two-thousand years later, the sun still shines, the moon still glows, and as hard as we might try to see it happen, the stars rarely shoot across the sky. Some people would conclude that if nothing has happened yet, it’s never going to. Others would say that it’s not possible to expect reasonable people to wait so long – that their sense of hope and anticipation will surely fade when no results can be seen.

Advent is the season of preparation and waiting; not just killing time or counting off days – wishing either that Christmas would hurry up and get here, or that we had just a few more days to get everything ready. Advent means waiting with a purpose, waiting expectantly, with great anticipation. During the final days they would spend together,

Jesus takes the opportunity to prepare his disciples for what is to come: that while life will get harder, God will continue to be present with them. Just when life becomes more difficult, God will draw them even closer. The fact that there will be hard times is not bad news, it is simple reality. The good news – on the other hand – is about God’s presence, and God’s continued appearances, through even the worst of times.<sup>1</sup> And so, Jesus says to them, stay alert; wait and keep watch; work to fulfill the tasks that God gives you to do until the new day is revealed.

During my first visit to the Pittsburgh Project – located on the North side of the city – within view of the original Heinz factory – I was introduced to a revolutionary change: the squeeze ketchup bottle. No longer was it necessary to screw the top of the glass bottle, turn it over and hold it above your hot dog or French fries and wait. No more hitting the bottom of the bottle with your open hand to make the ketchup come out faster. No more searching for just the right spot on the neck of the bottle where tapping might speed the process along. Now, you just had to flip the cap and give a squeeze and the same ketchup that you always had to wait for would be right there whenever you wanted it.

Most of us who grew up in the pre-squeeze generation remember the old Heinz ketchup TV commercial and its signature song, “Anticipation.” If you wanted the good stuff – the advertisers tried to convince us – you would have to wait; but if you bothered to wait, the reward was certain to be great.

We hear today in the reading from Isaiah that God acts on behalf of those who “wait for Him.” The people of Israel – and probably the author of Isaiah among them – had been exiled, taken away from their homes and their land; not knowing whether they would ever return home; not even knowing for sure whether their God could go with them into a foreign land. And yet, they continued to pray and worship and hope for God to intervene. They did not simply pass time or count down the days until their situation changed. God acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.

“Tear open the heavens and come down,” Isaiah pleaded with God. This is Advent - acknowledging the depth of the darkness and waiting for God; longing, yearning, and – in the middle of all that somewhere – hoping. This is Advent. The deepest feelings inside us, they all belong here, as together we pray for God to break through the sky and enter our world, our lives.

These stark Advent scriptures invite us to living, committed grappling. No one will ever succeed in taming them although many people will try. If you domesticate them, if you correct those Israelites who thought God was absent from them, and if you remove the promise from Mark because it didn’t happen, you’ve succeeded in taking away the power and truth of the scriptures – that they are meant to help us live through the dark days of Advent; the difficult days of waiting; the aching, longing feeling that it takes to keep awake with anticipation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Lloyd, “Tear Open the Heavens”

<sup>2</sup> Roberta Rominger, “This is Advent”

In the life of the church, the first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new Christian year. In a process similar to what we more traditionally do at New Year's, Advent provides an opportunity to put away the leftover pains or grudges of the passing year and hope for better in the new. Our hope lies in the knowledge that this new year will not be merely a repetition of the old, but one filled with new life and new creation.

The danger of not waiting during this season is that we turn Advent into a month-long celebration of Christmas; which may sound great, but borders on the overindulgent. Advent, of course, is not about waiting for a particular day, but allowing space and time for the coming – for that is the true meaning of Advent. This requires preparation and it requires hope that the something we await will come.

So maybe that's why the church, in its wisdom, has established the Season of Advent in these weeks before Christmas. If we are to see the fragile light which dawns among us in Christ, we must sit awhile in the darkness. If we are to hear the songs of the angels, we must first be silent. What could we do which would make you better able to see God's subtle incursions among us? Or, perhaps more to the point for us busy people, what could we avoid doing this Advent? <sup>3</sup>

Advent is the season for waiting and anticipation, a time of preparation for the coming of the Lord. The unexpected nature of his appearance is now so well known that it is expected: a baby born in the stable, lying in a manger. And yet, we are – even to this day – called to spend the Advent season preparing to recognize God's appearance in other times and places. As we wait, we are to give God glory through worship; as we wait, we are to hear and follow God's word. At the same time, as we wait, we are told not to worry; as we wait, we are instructed not to let our attention wander; as we wait, we are not to be swayed by those who claim to know exactly what is going to happen and when; and as we wait, Jesus urges us not to waste our God-given gifts in activities that do not strengthen one another and build up the body of Christ.

Advent is the season for waiting and for preparation. It is the time when we are reminded that although heaven and earth might pass away, the word of God will stand forever. Let us therefore wait upon God with great anticipation and prepared ourselves for the coming of the Lord; the Prince of Peace; the author of our salvation; the witness and revealer of God's goodness and love. Let us wait upon his arrival with anticipation in our work and our worship; in our keeping watch and in our welcoming. In all that we do, let us proclaim that the word of the Lord does stand forever.

Thanks be to God for the good news of redemption and forgiveness, of turning from sin and returning to God, of revealing God's presence and reveling in God's love. All glory and praise be to God, the Father and giver of our Lord, Jesus Christ. AMEN.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. AMEN* (Ephesians 3:20-21)

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<sup>3</sup> William Willimon, "Where is God?"