

1st Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.4.17

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

Happy New Year! That's what this is—this Sunday, the first Sunday of the new church year. So here again we begin the adventure that is the liturgical year. And, yes, it should be an adventure, beginning as it does with Advent and with this reading that lands us hard in the middle of adventure.

We might wish for a sleepier start to things.

Mark isn't one to go slow and easy, though—which is who we'll be following this year, Year B. We'll be with Mark most of the time, though supplemented with John. And Mark's gospel is short and terse; and Mark's Jesus is a man of few words and lots of action. Together, these two will have us straining to catch our breath within even just the first chapter of following them around, from the banks of the river Jordan to the wilderness where Jesus would encounter the devil to his launching his itinerant ministry, healing the sick and driving out darkness.

That's in weeks to come, that beginning. Now, though, we're find ourselves toward the end.

So goes time in this strange season of Advent. Four weeks long, it's a short season, the shortest one, in fact. But it encompasses lots of time, and in reverse order oddly enough, beginning with mention of the end, and ending at a beginning, a birth. For this reason, it might be felt as disorienting, as it should be I suppose. It anticipates a most strange event—God, if not tearing the heavens open, then at least coming down, as the prophet Isaiah had wished, if also different from how the prophet Isaiah had wished.

A baby born in a barn would hardly make mountains quake.

We'll take what we can get.

As of now, though, we're with Jesus in the Temple, two days prior to the festival of unleavened bread, two days prior to when Judas would betray him, and Peter and the other disciples would deny him, and Pilate would obey the insistent mob and order to crucify him, crucify him. We're two days prior to that. (Happy New Year!)

We're also, though, several decades later, when Mark was writing this gospel. Probably around the year 70, Mark wrote amidst Rome's first war against the Jews, and the empire's just having burned down Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple and occupied the Holy of Holies, that most sacred space in the Temple, violating it in what Mark would call earlier in this passage, a “desolating sacrilege.”

This passage: it's known as the Little Apocalypse, which sounds cute, doesn't it? The "Little Apocalypse"? It's called this, thought, because it's short—shorter than other apocalyptic we find in the Bible, of which there is a fair amount. Revelation is the most famous one, but there's also the book of Daniel, which Mark here refers to, in his mention of a desolating sacrilege. That's Daniel's phrase, referring to something that happened to the Jews living under the rule, and persecution, of Antiochus Epiphanes in the 2nd century before Christ. But apparently it was fitting for Mark's time too.

Desolating sacrilege: something happened in the Temple that was not to happen in the Temple, something grossly out of place, something grossly violating of the Holy of Holies.

This was a space that only the High Priest could enter, and only one day a year. In fact, so protected was this domain that legend has it the High Priest would wear a cord around his waist so, were he to die in the middle of his visitation in that space, someone else could remove him from that space, pulling him out without violating it by entering in.

So goes the legend. Who knows about actual practice? They stopped having a High Priest and stopped enacting the ritual nearly 2000 years ago, once the Temple was no more.

Desolating sacrilege: something would happen, had happened, in violation to what *should* happen. I think of the thugs in *A Clockwork Orange*, their gleeful "ultra-violence" against the domestic tranquility of the suburban homes they'd invade, to gang rape the women, to force the men to watch, to destroy everything that had been set so intentionally in place. I think of the president of the United States re-tweeting videos that have no productive place in modern society, to say nothing of being elevated as official presidential speech (which his Twitter account must certainly be considered). I think of "Christians" rallying around someone even a secular shopping mall had to cast out for his being too predatory. Desolating sacrilege. So gratuitously mean or grossly wrong.

Also deeply confusing: what gets turned inside out with such sacrilege can't be easily turned back inside in. Thus, Jesus' warning was prescient and Mark's remembering it here was a propos: "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is yet to come." In other words, they weren't there yet. In other words, *we aren't* there yet. Wars and rumors of wars, famine and earthquakes, oppression and desolating sacrilege, so much that seems like the end. But we aren't there yet.

People will speak of the end times as if they are now; zealots, street-corner preachers will say such things. And in a certain sense they're right: the end time is upon us. Classical theology has it that all time following the Christ event in history is the end time—in so far as Christians are to live the kingdom that is coming, for, by its assured coming, it is already here. Yes, Christians are to build the beloved community and live in its midst in the anticipation that this kingdom is to be realized by our living it and by such living it is so. But that's not the understanding those wearing the sandwich boards usually mean it. At least that's what I suspect. They mean to sound a warning, perhaps even a threat, and it comes from an assumption that they're in the right.

To my hearing, though, they also express a certain desperation. They want all this to be over. They want everything at last to be sorted out and complete.

And I have to say, I can relate.

I'll admit, I have a latent but persistent tendency to lean toward the end, to anticipate happily the end. I love the feeling of having completed something. I love the task of cleaning up after the party, love it as much as I enjoy the party. I'm satisfied with vacuuming after the Christmas tree has been taken down as much as I'm pleased at the presence of the tree. (Okay, more so.) I love napping after worship on a Sunday afternoon, being home now, my last week coming to completion and my next week not yet begun.

As I understand it, my sister always has more work than she could possibly do. Her job in administrating mental health care through Medicare and Medicaid to states who contract with her that they might figure it all out: she always has more work than she could possibly do, understaffed as they are, and gargantuan as the task is. By the time she finishes one contract, six more have arrived on her desk to get to.

Also as I understand it, much of the labor force faces these conditions. There's no sense of having completed the task at hand. There's no harvest time and then month after the harvest. There's no final exam and then summer vacation. There's no Sunday afternoon. This is the thing that was thought to make housewives crazy: housework never ends. This is the thing said to make postal workers "go postal": even before that last letter is in that last mailbox, the pile for your next delivery is high and growing to a tipping point.

I sometimes worry about myself, that I lean too eagerly toward the finish line. I sometimes worry that I'm a little too eager for dinner to be made, served, eaten, cleaned up after, and kitchen lights turned off. "The kitchen is closed," my mother used to say in exasperated victory at the end of the day. It was by way of saying, "Mess this up at your own risk." The end of the day is sometimes a

favorite part of my day. When I shake out the bed quilts first thing in the morning, I sometimes think, “Only sixteen hours until I can climb back under these.”

I’ll admit, I read so much of the news these days and I wonder, “When will this finally be over?” This administration? This cynicism that must surely result in its own destruction? This false doctrine that proclaims tax cuts for the rich to result in wellbeing for the least of these? This version of Christianity that bears *no resemblance* to the Christ so many white so-called Christians claim to follow? When will all this falseness and cruelty finally fall under its own brittle weight?

I’ll admit, it’s not very faithful. Just like those street-corner end time preachers: it’s not very faithful to what Jesus himself was implying in his Little Apocalypse, that we’re but in the middle of things.

There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be famines and earthquakes. All these things must be. And when the desolating sacrilege takes place—the act that is the ultimate undoing of what structures we’ve built as if to hold all this up—run for the hills, and hope it doesn’t happen in the winter, and woe to those who are pregnant or nursing during the fleeing and seeking refuge.

But even then, don’t be misled—by false Messiahs, but charlatans and showmen. Instead, keep awake, Jesus said. Keep awake, for you do not know when the time will come, when the master of the house will come—this house that we’ve been given to mind and maintain though isn’t truly ours.

We’re yet in the middle of things.

I used to housesit—huge, gorgeous houses with cable TV and dogs that needed walking though only a couple times a day. And there was always this possibility that haunted me, the homeowner might come back early, might return any time. Take care, then. Take care. Move in, yes. Make yourself at home. Stay as if you live here, but also as if you’re a guest, because you are. When the Fields returned, or the Kennedys returned, and found everything just fine: I’ll admit I was always relieved.

This meantime, then, doesn’t always come easy to me, sometimes comes very hard to me, and maybe does to you as well. Especially when the meantime feels so very mean, so short-sighted and self-destructive, so nihilistic, It’s not so easy a thing to live “not yet, not yet.” We can see what we’re aiming for. We have a vision of justice. We have a sense of the right, of the just, of the fair, of the good. We’ve cultivated it. In church, week after week, we’ve prayed for it. We’ve followed Christ for it. So this “not yet, not yet,” this discrepancy between what we’re longing for and what we’re enduring: it’s sometimes too much.

Advent, then, might pose a real challenge. Advent, with its “ritualized longing,” as Lutheran pastor John Stendhal calls it, might be a waking up akin to when some part of your body—an arm, a leg—might have “fallen asleep” and now is prickling itself back awake. Jab. Jab. You wake up to realize more fully your own longing. You wake up to see how unfulfilled your deepest hopes are. You wake up to the morning newspaper, to the latest podcast, to the most recent decision of the senate or the electorate, and you recognize, “Not yet. Not even close.”

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

I’m with Isaiah on this one.

But Jesus: “Keep awake. Keep alert. For you do now know when...”

On Friday, when I was supposed to have a quiet day for writing the sermon, the boys didn’t have school because the parents had parent/teacher conferences. Jesse and I headed out to spend the first two hours of the day at the school that should have been keeping the boys away and busy. I had plenty to do, after all, as regards my own life: a sermon to write, a sermon to write. There’s always a sermon to write.

When I got home, Tobias was dressed for skiing and desperately wanted a ride to Jiminy Peak. I had sort of promised I’d provide that.

Oh, and also his friend Nick needed a ride, Nick who lives on the south end of Lenox and so in the opposite direction of Jiminy Peak.

Also, probably Sam would need a ride, but he at least lives in Pittsfield.

Nick hadn’t even thought about skiing until that morning, and was still rummaging through last year’s equipment when we got to his house. Half an hour later, he’d found boots that fit (sort of) and skis. But where was his helmet? Oh, here it was.

Jiminy Peak is about forty minutes from Nick’s house.

We got to Jiminy Peak around 11 AM.

I left them to figure out this new mountain on their own, but with parting words, “Who’s picking you up?”

“Can you?” Tobias asked.

On Route 7 heading south someone had left at the foot of the driveway some exercise equipment: a stationary bicycle, a folded up treadmill, some contraptions for strength training. I drove by them trying to remember, hadn’t I seen on Facebook that the humane society was looking for treadmills, so their more energetic dogs could exercise through the snowy winter?

I'd seen it on Facebook in my compulsive, soothing scrolling through my news feed. "What's happened now?" I seem to be asking myself as I scroll. "What's happened now? What has he done now?"

I scrolled right past that one. It only stayed with me because I couldn't figure out how dogs could be trained to use a treadmill. I have a hard enough time with them. I get dizzy that I'm moving but the room around me isn't. I worry I'll fall off it and really hurt myself. Running on the roadside, even sometimes into on-coming traffic, feels safer somehow. But apparently dogs can do it. Who knew?

If I was remembering it right, should I go back and get the treadmill?

What would it take me, an extra ten minutes? The human society, while not on the way, isn't far off the way.

I did a U-turn at the mall connection road and drove back.

The equipment was dry so it must have just been brought out, after that recent and brief rain. And the sign said it all worked.

I got back in my car and called the humane society. But, no, they hadn't asked for a treadmill. Had I made that up? But how would I have made up something I'd never even imagined?

So maybe it was the Sonsini shelter. I follow them on Facebook too, which I could access on this phone.

These smart phones! Am I right?

I logged onto Facebook, clicked over to their page, scrolled down their recent posts, and there it was. "The active dogs in the shelter are in a need of a working treadmill for the winter months, preferably one that folds up. If anyone knows of one that someone is donating, please keep us in mind!! The pups will greatly appreciate it! Thank you in advance!"

The backseats in the Prius were already folded down, to have made room for the skis. That treadmill would probably fit because it did indeed fold up. There it was, all folded up.

Back outside, managing to move it was a trick. I felt conscious of the cars racing by, their drivers wondering about me in my skirt and clogs, trying to wrestle a treadmill into this little car. What an awkward fool. What a silly woman, and a cheapskate to boot.

It fit.

Sonsini was also not quite on the way, but also was not out of the way. I'd get there, according to the GPS, at 11:45. It opened at noon. I took my time, not that I *had* it—time. But who does? Who does *have time*?

When I got there, there were others there too. A weathered old man smoking a cigarette out front, a couple going in the front door perhaps hoping to adopt. A pit-bull terrier watched me from his kennel as I came close. Poking his head out from behind the shelter, he regarded me and then lost interest, disappearing back behind the wall.

Inside the shelter, people were busy. Someone was hosing down the floor. Two people were in the office rummaging through things. A Chihuahua with a kerchief knotted jauntily around his neck trotted over and sniffed up at me. Someone asked, “Can I help you?”

“I have a treadmill, and I think you were looking for treadmills.”

She referred me to one of the women in the office.

“I have a treadmill,” I told her too. “And I think you were looking for treadmills.”

“Oh my God, really?” she said “Yes! She has a treadmill,” she told the other woman in the office. “Yes! Bring it around! You can drive in through the gate. I’ll open it for you. Wow! She has a treadmill.”

I went to my car, drove it through the gate, backed it up to the service entrance, and parked. Outside again, I opened the trunk hatchback, pulled the treadmill out, landed it on its wheels (“Oh, look! It has wheels!), and wheeled it in.

“It’s perfect,” someone said.

“Yeah, it’s pretty small,” I agreed.

“I know, and it folds up! I wondered, where are we gonna put a treadmill? But this will fit easily. We can just put it right here.”

Another woman came up, “With winter coming, we can’t always walk the dogs. Some need a lot of exercise and some of our volunteers have a hard time in the snow. This is perfect!”

“Yes, it’s perfect,” the first woman said. “Merry Christmas,” she said to me as I left. “You’re the first person I’ve said that to! But it’s December! December first! Now’s the time.”

We’ve been thinking a lot lately about people who find themselves in just the right place to do the just right thing amidst circumstances that seem suddenly, and in some cases deeply, not right. Lawyers who have the weekend free to flood airports where people are threatened with deportation, judges who find themselves face-to-face with unlawful executive orders, journalists who are unearthing a story that suddenly seems crucial: we’ve remembered people in prayer who find themselves to be just the right person in just the right place at the crucial time. We’ve also prayed that we might each be such a person at some given time, that we might have the wherewithal to recognize what needs to be done and then to have the courage or the conviction to do it.

What needs to be done will sometimes be great, history-making or re-making. What needs to be done will more often be small and, as such, perhaps even harder to recognize.

For these, we are to keep awake. For these, we are to stay alert. The kingdom is coming; and we don't when, we don't the time, we know only the truth that it is coming, even in this, the middle of things. And it's exhausting, I know—this middle of things. It's exhausting the amount of work yet to do—to endure, to resist, to act for good. There is so much inequality. There is so much injustice. The grip of racism will hardly give, and the trivialization of women is far-reaching. There are so many homeless dogs in so many shelters, which isn't even to mention the other homeless pets, which isn't even to mention all the homeless people—the poor, the unwell, the migrant, the refugee. There is so much. There is *so much*.

Keep watch, therefore. For it might come down to you. Stay awake, be alert: for it might be *you* the world needs at this moment. You think you know what time it is, but time might tell you otherwise. Christ might have other ideas as regards this now.

I told you Advent was but the beginning of an adventure. So wake up.

Thanks be to God.