

Sermon: About That Day or Hour

New North Church, Hingham

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29 November 2020

Based on **Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37**

New church year, new church season, and we call it Advent.

In this season, we're looking more toward Jesus' second coming, to the Son of Man returning in glory, than we are preparing for Christmas, which recalls and celebrates Jesus' first coming among us.

Advent is about the arrival of the reign of God, a kingdom of justice and peace. Advent is also a time of hope, to rejoice in glad tidings, and to welcome the Messiah.

Isaiah has his own context, and he was active hundreds of years before Jesus, and yet Christians borrow imagery from Isaiah and use him as our prophetic guide all the time, especially in Advent.

Today's reading is both a prayer and a lament over God's apparent absence. Isaiah has seen the destruction of the First Temple and witnessed the exile of most of Jerusalem's elite to Babylon. Now, thanks to the Persian king Cyrus, a remnant of exiles has returned to Jerusalem. What they find is not what they expected. Everything is too broken, including the nation's faith. The people are wondering, are they still God's people and is God still their God?

Isaiah wants God to be God, to step up and make the divine presence known again. This is no time for God to remain silent and hidden. Isaiah would have God tear open the heavens and make a dramatic entrance, as it was in the old days when the mountains quaked at God's presence. Maybe Isaiah is remembering God's appearance at Sinai; Christians remember when God came down in the form of Jesus of Nazareth.

There is some ambiguity in the verse where Isaiah says, "because you hid yourself we transgressed," which implies that the people sinned because God was absent. It could also mean that God became angry at the people's sin and abandoned them. Regardless of the English translation, the verse is ambiguous.

Did God deliberately cause the catastrophe, or did the people break the covenant?

The people know they are responsible for their situation, a consequence of their withdrawal from God as a nation. Isaiah believes that God is hidden but still active, and so offers a prayer of the people's common memory of God as a loving, forgiving *but peeved* father and judge.

Like Isaiah, Mark wrote his Gospel in a time of conflict and upheaval, as did Matthew. The Romans had just destroyed the Second Temple, and everyone thought for sure that these were the end times. In their eyes, this had to be as bad as it gets, and they were wondering, where is the Messiah who will make everything right again?

Mark's Gospel is all about impending suffering and upheaval. Jesus has just predicted the destruction of the Temple. It was two days before the Passover. And even though bad things were on the horizon for Jesus, he took the time to warn the disciples not to be distracted by current events, and he reassured them.

How familiar that should seem to us then, in the midst of an ongoing pandemic with all the associated anxiety and suffering it caused. If you took this year and balled it all up and put it in a novel, no one would believe it. It would seem too outrageous. We've seen murder hornets, uncontrolled wildfires, turmoil in the British royal family, political intrigue, protests of all kinds, peace in the Middle East, not to mention the pandemic. It's unprecedented, and we still have a month to go.

Like Mark's audience, people are wondering, are these the end times? We know from having read from Matthew's Gospel these past six weeks or so that these are *not* the end times, despite appearances.

The historical record gives us context on this too. In every era, there have been good times and bad times. There have been *very* good times and some very *bad* times. Usually but not always, there can be good times in one place at the same time there are bad times elsewhere. That's how it goes.

You've heard the saying that, in New England, if you don't like the weather, wait a bit; it'll change. History is like that too. When the end times come, we'll know it, and Jesus confirms this in today's reading.

By any stretch, our normal, pre-pandemic life has been transformed. The year's upheaval has changed just about everything that we once took for granted.

Isaiah reminds us that God can be hidden from us – for whatever reason – and still be active in holy judgement and salvation. Mark writes that God is present even in times like these. And we might wonder, well, where? What are we supposed to do?

To that, Jesus says, “keep awake!” This foreshadows what happens in the Garden of Gethsemane in the very next chapter when Jesus tells Peter, James, and John three times to keep awake while he went off to pray. The second time, Jesus told them to “keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial” as he was about to do (14:38). Mark links the inability to keep watch to betrayal.

But what if it’s not a betrayal? What if Mark’s audience, and that now includes us, what if we are all figuratively asleep when we hear this passage? In waking up, we are changed and transformed. Fully awake now, we can examine our need for God’s presence in our lives. We can now think about letting go of the past and look forward.

Strictly speaking, once we’re past the pandemic, and it will happen, there is no going back to ‘normal.’ Dining out will always feel different. Attending a live sporting event will be different. Just getting together with our families for a holiday will be different, at least for a little while.

Nothing is guaranteed in this life, but Scripture tells us that God is bound to us and we are bound to God. Isaiah realized that God is God, full of mercy and grace and steadfast love, and always present.

As we anticipate what is to come, we may not know the day or the hour – not even the Son of Man knows – but it is our responsibility to keep alert, to be ready, to stay faithful. We may have missed Jesus the first time around, and that’s not our fault, but we’ve been put on notice that he will be back, so keep awake.

By staying alert, by living faithfully, we will be prepared for that day when it comes, and we may get a taste of what life in the Kingdom will be like even now.

Amen.

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