

Advent – Season of Light

HOPE

Mark 13:24-37

1. Hope is our light through the darkest times.

2. The light will arrive.

3. Live in the light of hope.

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Illuminate: Hope

Advent 2021

Mark 13:24-37

How many of us do this: You get into bed, turn off the lights, and look at your phone to check your social media accounts one more time. As you scroll, you see that coronavirus infections are up. Maybe your kids can't go back to school. The economy is cratering. Racial issues are a hot topic. Still, you incessantly scroll through bottomless doom-and-gloom news for hours as you sink into a pool of despair.

This habit has become known as “doomscrolling” -- the act of consuming an endless procession of negative online news. Over the past two years in the news cycle, it's only gotten more intense. The constant stream of news and social media never ends. According to a recent survey from the Pew Research Center, 66% of Americans feel worn out by the amount of news available.

Recently, Dictionary.com named doomscrolling one of its “New Words We Created Because of Coronavirus.” Doomscrolling is a new word in the English language. There's something else about that word – particularly in the word doom. The act of doomscrolling, then, is to roll toward annihilation. If you think about it from a Bible perspective, it has a Revelation tone. When you do that, you are watching the demise of so much, while at the same time, also slowly destroying yourself.

Doomscrolling will never actually stop the doom. Amidst all of the pain, isolation, and destruction of the past two years, it's not worth it to add on to the strain with two hours of excess social media every night. That act is literally eroding your mental health.¹

Instead, focus on something called the Gospel – it means “Good News.” It is the Good News that God loves you and sent his Son as the light of that Good News into this world. We have hope in the darkness.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and we remember that Jesus arrived on this earth, and that after his death and resurrection and ascension into heaven, he will return for us one day.

If you've read the Advent reading for today in our Advent devotional, you know that the Scripture passage is an interesting one, having to do with the end times (well, sort of). But if you haven't read it yet, I'd like to read it for us. Would you honor God's Word by standing with me please as I read it to us?

¹ Angela Watercutter, “Doomscrolling Is Slowly Eroding Your Mental Health,” *Wired* (6-25-20); Jeffrey Gottfried, “Americans' news fatigue isn't going away – about two-thirds still feel worn out,” *Pew Research* (2-26-20); Lulu Garcia-Navarro, “Your 'Doomscrolling' Breeds Anxiety. Here's How To Stop The Cycle,” *NPR* (7-19-20)

“But in those days, following that distress,
“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

“At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’” (Mark 13:24-37, niv)

Now there’s a great deal going on in this passage, and right away we are drawn to the idea of the end times, and we are tempted to start looking for secret clues about when that will come. Of course, when we do that, we are violating the very thing Jesus said in this passage; if Jesus doesn’t even know the dates of the end times, neither will you. So we are *not* going to give in to the popular temptation to read into this passage stuff that isn’t there. What I *will* do is give us the context of what Jesus *is* saying, and not spend any time on what Jesus clearly *isn’t* saying. Because beyond the conjecture and end-times guessing, there is actually a very comforting word of hope for us in the midst of what appears like it is doom and gloom.

In this teaching, which starts at the beginning of chapter 13, Jesus might seem like he’s giving some confusing statements, because at one time he’s talking about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and then he’s talking about the end times, and then about the disciples being arrested and persecuted, then the Temple again, and then he says in verse 30 that the generation of the Apostles wouldn’t pass away before they saw those things happening. It can be kind of confusing and mysterious, and seems like a lot of doom and gloom.

So let me try to sort it out a bit for us. When Jesus talks about “these things,” he’s talking about the present events. When Jesus says “that day” or “that hour,” He’s talking about His return – His second coming.

Now, first, when Jesus is talking about “these things” – present events, it’s about the destruction of the Temple, and about the disciples being arrested and persecuted. He’s

talking to his disciples and followers right then; that's what he referred to when he said that their present generation would be alive to see it happen. And it did; this conversation happened around 32 AD, and within 30 years they would begin to be arrested and persecuted, and the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD – less than 40 years later. In 66 AD the Jews rebelled and took over Jerusalem and occupied it until the Roman army conquered Jerusalem in 70 AD and destroyed their Temple.

The comments about “that day” – the end of times, when Jesus will return the second time, are a bit more hard to decipher. Jesus uses terminology that is called “Apocalyptic,” which is similar to the style of the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel and some of the other prophets, and later John used it in the book of Revelation. Apocalyptic literature is sensational and symbolic and hyperbolic, which makes it hard to understand. Most of the time, you don't know what it means until you are either experiencing it, or you are just finishing experiencing it. So before you get tempted to begin assigning events and dates to it, remember that Jesus said very, very clearly in verses 32-33:

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.” (Mark 13:32-33, niv)

Mark is establishing two important theological terms: Christology and eschatology. Christology is the certainty that Jesus is the Christ – that he is the Son of God and that he IS God. The term “Son of Man” that Jesus uses to refer to himself is a term that Daniel used to describe the Messiah, God's Son. There is no question in Jesus' mind and understanding that He is God. The second, eschatology, is the certainty that Jesus will return. Because he IS the Christ, He WILL come back one day. Those things are certain. But the day and time of that are not certain. Jesus says that even *he* isn't sure about that – only the Father himself knows. That might seem confusing that Jesus, who is God, wouldn't know what God the Father knows. Can I try to clear that up for you?

This passage helps us understand that Jesus is fully God, but he is also fully human. There are things that Jesus did not need to know in order to be the Messiah. He had all power, but he limited it, didn't he? He had all authority, but he didn't exercise it, did he? He had all knowledge, but he didn't access it. Make sense?

The other thing Jesus is making clear is that, *if it wasn't important for Jesus to know the date and time, it is not important for you to know it either. (repeat).*

Okay? But there *are* some things that Jesus wanted to make sure we understood in this sort of confusing passage as we wait for Jesus to return. And the first is that...

1. Hope is our light *through* the *darkest times*.

Jesus doesn't pull any punches; before he returns, we will go through some very dark times. He describes these wild cosmological events like the sun going dark, that there will be no light from the moon, there will be no more stars in the night sky and the other planetary objects won't give any reflection. It doesn't get much darker than that! It's hard to know what all this cataclysmic imagery means, but it seems to be telling us that there will come the collapse of the ruling world orders and the rise of a cosmic-like replacement in which

God's plan will reign supreme.²

But despite how frighteningly dark it might seem, the one constant in that whole story is: Jesus. And Jesus promised to never leave us or forsake us. He will never lie to us and will never betray us. We can count on him because he loves us and gave his life for us. We need never lose our hope in Jesus, no matter how dark the circumstances might be. And if that is true during the cataclysmic end of all things as we know them, it is most certainly true in whatever dark time you might be going through now. There's no need to do any more doomscrolling!

When I was a child, I didn't like going to bed because I was afraid of the dark. So my parents would leave my door open a bit, and they would leave the hall light on. I would go to bed hearing them talking or watching TV. I was comforted seeing the light from another room. I knew that I was safe because the sounds and light from another room meant it was nearby, and in the morning, after the sun had risen, I knew I'd be out there in that room and in the light. I wasn't alone.

But there was one problem: when they went to bed, they would turn out the hall light, and sometimes I would wake up *after* they went to bed, when there was no more hall light, and there were no more sounds (except the ever present sound of dad snoring). I would cry out in fear, so my parents took care of that for me, too: they plugged in a little night light in my room. That way, if I woke up and the rest of the house was dark, I could see enough around me to know that all was well, and it was enough of a reminder to me that in the morning, the sun would rise, and I would be in the light.

Christ is the light that has been brought into this world: in John 8:12 Jesus says:

"I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

There is incredible comfort in that. But here's something you might not have realized: when things are dark, it doesn't mean God isn't there. In fact, God *lives* in the dark. In 1 Kings 8:12 we are told:

"The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness." (1 Kings 8:12)

God lives in the darkness. There is no place so dark that God is not there. So when it feels like we are going through darkness, the darkness itself reminds us that we have hope. That's the promise of Christmas from the prophet Isaiah:

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2, niv)

You may feel like you are in darkness, but you have hope. The Apostle Paul said:

"Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:9)

Darkness reminds us of what is already true: we are desperately dependent on God. We cannot function apart from God.³ Jesus is the light, yes, and he is our reminder that even

² David Smith, *Mark: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 243.

³ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/blogs/stephen-altrogge/god-often-does-his-best-work-in-the-darkness.html>

when it is dark, we always, always, always have hope because of Christ.
Another thing we learn from this passage of Jesus' teaching is that...

2. The light will *arrive*.

No matter how bleak things may seem, our hope tells us that Jesus will always arrive. He came to this earth to live among us and reveal the heart of our Father God to us. He died for us and rose from the dead for us, so he will return for us one day. Jesus wanted to make it very clear in this passage that he will, he will, he will come again.

And here's the thing: Jesus promised to never leave us or forsake us. That means that, even while we hope in his certain return, we also have hope while we wait, because he is with us. It seems strange, I know, that while we are waiting for his return, he is with us until then. Here's how that works: we have not seen with our eyes God the Father – that is true. And also true, we do not currently have the physical presence of God the Son. But that is why we have the always present, the indwelling presence of God the Spirit until Jesus returns. That's what Jesus meant when he made all those promises about giving us His Spirit, that's what happened at the day of Pentecost, and that is who is with, and within, every follower of Jesus. We have his Spirit within us until he returns in his physical body again one day. That's why the Bible says:

“The Holy Spirit is the down payment on our inheritance, which is applied toward our redemption as God's own people, resulting in the honor of God's glory.”
(Ephesians 1:14, ceb)

The Holy Spirit is our guarantee that Jesus will return, and he is the presence of God, always with us, until that day happens. Jesus, the light, will arrive. He arrived at his first Advent, or arrival.

Tilly Smith and her family relaxed on the beach. Their first family vacation had taken them to Thailand. That morning, ten-year-old Tilly, her parents, and sister Holly, went for a walk along Mai Khao beach. They enjoyed the warm breeze in their faces and felt the sand squish in between their toes.

Two weeks prior to their holiday, Tilly had learned about tsunamis in her geography class. She did not find geography tantalizing, but the video her teacher showed had caught her attention. So, as Tilly and her family walked the beach, she noticed the waves going out but not coming in.

Tilly alerted her parents that they were surrounded by signs that something unusual and cataclysmic would occur. At first, they were dismissive, but Tilly's passion and persistence paid off. She began shouting, "There is going to be a tsunami!"

Now, what would you do if you were on vacation with your family and your ten-year-old daughter started screaming on the beach that a tsunami was about to strike? Tilly shouted louder and louder, and her panic frightened her younger sister, who began to sob hysterically.

I imagine the volume increasing with her parents saying something like, "Tilly, calm down!"

It will be okay. You're scaring your sister! Get yourself under control, now!" Tilly's dad took Holly back to the hotel to calm her down. But Tilly looked around and saw the people in the ocean, on the sand, and just knew in her heart that everyone was in danger. Tilly ran back to the hotel to find her dad talking with a security guard. He said, "I know this sounds completely mad, but my daughter says there's going to be a tsunami."

The security guard listened not to a PhD candidate, brain surgeon, or NASA scientist but to a passionate plea coming from a ten-year-old British schoolgirl. The guard listened and then shouted for people to get off the beach. People scattered all over the place as pandemonium set in. The hotel lobby, on a higher floor, became a gathering place.

That tsunami, triggered by an earthquake at the floor of the Indian Ocean, struck. The tsunami killed an estimated 230,000 people. But not one person from Tilly's beach died that we know of. Tilly's dad, in shock after learning of the horrific devastation and suffering, said to Tilly, "What if we hadn't listened to you?"⁴

We heard the warnings when God arrived as a child during his first Advent. Jesus tells us plainly these things will happen. And we can count on his second Advent as well. In the meantime, we have the light of hope within us through the presence of God the Spirit who will never leave us or forsake us.

And so, given that truth, we don't have to live our lives in fear, or in defeat. Instead, Jesus tells us very clearly to...

3. *Live* in the light of hope.

Jesus spoke in that passage about the fig tree, and how we can watch the signs of the seasons and the signs on the tree itself to know when it will start bearing fruit. Bearing fruit is a metaphor all throughout the Bible to communicate that we as followers of Jesus should be living for God, loving God, and loving others, and introducing others to Jesus. Our good works and introducing people to Jesus are the ways we bear fruit. Jesus is saying that, because we have hope in him no matter what we are going through, we can *live* for him in all circumstances. Others should be able to see the truth of both of Jesus' advents in our lives. In fact, the last word in this passage is the clear instruction and command:

"What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (Mark 13:37, niv)

We read that word "watch," and we think it means we should live our lives with our eyes fixed on the horizon of world events, so that we are ready in a moment's notice when we see him coming. But think about it; why would we do that? Jesus has already made it clear that we can't miss his arrival; there will be no light, and suddenly he will appear in his blazing glory. You won't see him coming; he simply will *be*. *He will suddenly arrive*. So what good does it do to scan the distant horizon? And what does Jesus mean by "watch"? He means that *we must be ready for it*. And the way we are ready for it is to live for him, now, every moment of our lives. In fact, the word "watch" that Jesus uses doesn't just mean to be alert. It also means to be fully awake, *to be alive*. To. Be. Alive. Because we have the

⁴ Heath Adamson, *The Sacred Chase* (Baker Books, 2020), pp. 20-22

light of hope in our lives, even when things seem darkest, we ought to live every moment of our lives for Jesus, bearing fruit for him. That means we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good for others and introducing people to Jesus – telling them about him and how much he loves them and how much he’s done for them.

Many of you know that before moving here twelve years ago, we pastored for 11 years in a town called Mountain Home, Idaho, and there is a large Air Force base there. We served there during the attacks on 9/11, and then the subsequent warfare in Afghanistan and during Operation Desert Shield. There was an Air Force pilot who, after flying a very long mission – one of many others that he had flown, was surprised to be given permission to immediately pull his crew together and fly his plane home. They flew across the ocean to their assigned base, and then had a long drive to their homes. They drove all night, and when his buddies dropped him off at his driveway just after sun-up, there was a big banner across the garage—“Welcome Home Dad!”

How did they know? No one had called, and the crew themselves hadn't expected to leave so quickly. The pilot said, "When I walked into the house, the kids, about half dressed for school, screamed, 'Daddy!' My wife came running down the hall—she looked terrific—hair fixed, make-up on, and a crisp yellow dress. 'How did you know?' I asked.

'I didn't,' she answered through tears of joy. 'We knew you'd be home one of these days. We knew you'd try to surprise us, so we were ready every day.'"

Friends, don't let Jesus find you caught off guard. At the first Advent, hope entered this dark world in the light of Jesus. No matter how bleak and dark things might seem, we have hope. We have the certain hope that, because of his first advent, he will arrive again, and until then, he is always with us in his Spirit. Until then, we must live fully for him at all times. That is our hope.

Prayer

Benediction:

“May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he’ll do it!” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, tmt)