

# Anticipaaation

## Mark 13:24-37

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’  
with great power and glory.

Then he will send out the angels,  
and gather his elect from the four winds,  
from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson:  
as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves,  
you know that summer is near.

So also, when you see these things taking place,  
you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away  
until all these things have taken place.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows,  
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

It is like a person going on a journey, when they leave home  
and puts the servants in charge, each with their work,  
and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake —for you do not know  
when the master of the house will come, in the evening,  
or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,  
or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

# **Anticipaaaation**

Mark 13:24-37

December 3, 2023

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## **I.**

It is out of sheer selfishness that I preach this sermon today; I make no bones about it. Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas. The word “advent” is derived from the Latin *adventus* meaning “coming” but is a translation for the Greek word *parousia* which refers to the return of Christ at the end of days.

## **II.**

The tone for our modern understanding of Advent was really set by a French Cistercian monk named Bernard of Clairvaux, later referred to as the Doctor of the Church, who lived from 1090 to 1153 C.E. Bernard articulated three comings, or Advents, of Christ: in the flesh in Bethlehem; in our hearts each day; and, in glory at the end of time.

The season of Advent, then, offers us a three-fold opportunity. First, to celebrate the incarnation of Jesus, at his birth, or nativity, in the manger. Second, to recognize the arrival of the Christ into our hearts each and every day. And, third, to share in the ancient longing for the return of the Messiah, and to be alert for his Second Coming. The first Sunday in Advent is also the liturgical New Year, as it signals the change in the cycles of the lectionary, A, B and C corresponding to each of the synoptic Gospels as they appear in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

## **III.**

Today we begin Year B, and for the next 12 months our Gospel lectionary reading, which I often select as the sermon text, will come from the Gospel of Mark; which, I concede, is my favorite gospel from which to preach. As the earliest version of the good news of Jesus Christ, pre-dating Matthew, Luke and the latest, John, Mark is terse, raw and to the point. Mark represents the story of Jesus at its least embellished and unflowery best.

Mark is also the least symbolic, the opposite of John, and is written, unlike Matthew or Luke, with fairly singular purpose: to get the message *out* there regardless of audience or secondary intent. If John is a NYC loft apartment chair in black leather and chrome, Luke a Stickley Chippendale high back dining room set and Matthew a Lazy Boy recliner Mark is a three legged stool with a plain wooden seat.

#### IV.

Today's passage, from Mark chapter 13, has quite an ominous beginning:

*"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."*

(Personally, I don't care too much for the sounds of this.)

Jesus then refers to an often cited Christological title, saying:

*"Then we will see the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power & glory, sending out the angels, and gathering his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."*

But while this event, when it happens, will be unmistakable, unmissable, and something from which there will be no hiding, and though there will be these signs of the Son's eminent arrival, the precise moment *when* this will occur remains a profound mystery.

#### V.

Jesus says, *"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."* Therefore, the listener is admonished:

*"Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come, at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else you may be found asleep when he comes suddenly."*

Finally, Jesus concludes with a warning, *"What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."*

I certainly make no pretense about my inability to understand a darkened sun, a moon which gives no light, and stars falling from the stars. Neither do I have a sense, precisely, of when the Son of Man will be arriving in clouds with power and glory. However, like all of you, I certainly understand the likelihood of being found sleeping.

## VI.

Maybe not dead to the world zonked out in my recliner, or curled up in flannel sheets, but certainly with my eye on any ball but this one. The world, and what it means to live in it, certainly has the almost irresistible power of deadening us to the things that matter most, and those things which only *truly* matter; we fall asleep. *Zzzzzzzzzz*. We cook, clean, shop, raise our kids, go to work, watch TV, follow sports, hunt, fish, read, knit, engage in crafts & hobbies, save for retirement, get enmeshed in politics, travel, worry about the future, and try to find time for ourselves; we fall asleep.

Isn't it ironic, then, that at such a time of year when we should be *most* alert, even promising ourselves that *this* year we will *be* more alert, we fall asleep even *more* deeply. We shop, bake, decorate, wrap, fuss, travel, entertain and exhaust ourselves right into a stupor; we enter a hibernation born of the holidays.

## VII.

Don't you find it the least bit odd, that when it comes to the *one* thing about which we should be the most joyfully expectant Jesus warns us, correctly, to keep ourselves awake to it? You would think that this would be the *easiest* part of the spiritual life, not the most difficult. We strive to be loving, charitable, faith-filled, disciplined, pious, virtuous, forgiving, accepting, open-hearted and open-minded, altruistic and patient. And, against all odds, we more often than not succeed. When it comes to expectance, however, when it comes to excitement, when it comes to anticipation we fall asleep. *Zzzzzzzz*.

## VIII.

Now, I for one, though certainly just one among a great many, have had more than my fill of what Christmas has become: the commercialism, the stress, the faux sentimentality and the pandering to products. But, our modern notion of Christmas does offer one important reminder. That something critically important lives dormant not in our mind nor our heart nor, even, our soul, but something that abides deep down in our gut: the joy of anticipation. We often say Christmas is about kids, and it is. Because kids at Christmas remind us of a memory we all have of what it felt like, viscerally, to anticipate something so much, with so much *hope* and *excitement*, it *literally*

made our bodies bounce and vibrate, causing us to feel as if we were about to jump right out of our own skin.

I told you at the onset that today's sermon is unabashedly selfish. Here is why: all I want for Christmas this year is to feel that way again. To be *overwrought* with anticipation.

## **IX.**

I remember one Christmas, as a kid. We had attended the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at my church, returned home to change into our footie pajamas, then exchanged gifts between my brothers and I, did our own Advent Wreath lighting and reading, put out cookies and egg nog for Santa (and a carrot for Rudolph) then trooped up the stairs to bed knowing that Santa would only arrive when all the kids were asleep. I remember like it was yesterday, lying in my bed and, trying desperately to fall asleep, all to no avail; too many visions of sugar plums were dancing in my head. When, and I am not making this up, suddenly, I heard (and felt) *actual* steps on the rooftop between my bedroom and the chimney. *And*, as if that wasn't enough, I heard the sound of sleigh bells jingling. It felt like my heart was going to pound itself right out of my chest.

## **X.**

Now, **THATS** the kind of joyful anticipation I want to feel this Christmas. Of course, it turned out that it was only my Uncle Jimmy. He had quietly carried a ladder to our house and sneaked up onto our roof; with a set of sleigh bells, no less. I knew this, because a few minutes later I heard the front door open and, rising up from the foyer, this huge roar of a laughter which was all too familiar. You would think that I would have been angry at the low-down nature of such a prank, but all I could think about at that moment was how lucky I was that Santa had not found me still awake.

Now, I don't know what Christmas is for you, but I do know what it *should* be for all of us: a time to remember what joyous anticipation feels like, and make room for the possibility of it, again, in our lives. The anticipation of the return of the child born in a manger on a silent and holy night so long ago, and the *joyous* anticipation of Christ's advent in our hearts each day. May such a Christmas be yours this day, and in every day this Advent Season.