

# “What Do We Really Want for Christmas? HOPE”

Mark 13:24-37

Sunday, December 3, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new church year. Advent last for the four Sundays until Christmas. In Advent, which means “coming” we remember when Jesus came to earth, born as a baby, and we look into the future, when God will come again, in the fullness of time.

Our gospel reading today, for the first Sunday of Advent, with Christmas not too far away, may seem a bit surprising, with no shepherds, no baby, no manger. Instead we have the disturbing imagery of suffering and the sun going dark. But every year on the first Sunday of Advent, the Revised Common Lectionary has an apocalyptic reading, with similar imagery, perhaps to help us remember that God is in charge of time.

The Greek word used in verse 33 for “time” is the word Kairos, the same word that Jesus uses in the beginning of the gospel when he said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Kairos is a special time, an opportune time, a time to be awake and alert to new things happening.

As we reflect on this reading from Mark, the context is important. In the first century, Christians and Jews came under persecution. So these words were encouragement and hope for people in challenging times, to stay awake and be alert for God’s presence.

“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 man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his 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.”

I’m guessing that many of you came to church today looking forward to Advent and Christmas music, with candles and festive decorations, while looking forward to chili and cookies at noon. And then we get this challenging and disturbing reading from the gospel.

The 13th chapter of Mark is one of a few chapters in the gospels that are often called “apocalyptic” in that they paint a picture of chaos and uncertainty. Much of the book of Revelation is like this as well, along with various sections of the Old Testament.

Some people, including movie producers and some preachers, spend a lot of time with these apocalyptic verses. And sadly over the years, I’ve seen such verses used in fear-mongering and manipulative ways.

I don’t think we should ignore the apocalyptic verses but I don’t think we need to fret over them. We need to hear them in context. They are not meant to predict the future, but rather to offer encouragement and hope to persecuted people in the present.

The messages I hear from Mark 13 is “Don’t be afraid, keep alert, keep awake. No matter what, God is with you.”

We may not face persecution like those first century Christians, but we do face chaos, and hardship, and sadness.

- Many of us are sad that a loved one is gone, and the journey of mourning is hard.
- Many of us are struggling with complicated family relationships.
- Many of us face uncertainty with health issues or job issues or economic issues.
- Many of us are frustrated with divisive politics.
- Many of us are deeply concerned about hurricanes, floods, and climate change.
- And many of us are disgusted with recent revelations of sexual misconduct and abuse, done by trusted entertainment and political figures.

In the midst of this chaos and sadness, we have to figure out how to respond, what to do. We could choose cynicism, or despair, or fear. But we are called to be people of hope.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann reminds us of the difference:

What anxiety and hope actually have in common is a sense of what is possible. In anxiety, we anticipate possible danger. In hope, we anticipate possible deliverance...

So we come together in church, with everything going on in the world and in our lives that might make us anxious, and together, we light a candle of HOPE. We light a candle of hope, we sing songs of hope, and we gather around the table for the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

We come together in the midst of the chaos and sadness and confusion to remind each other that God is with us, and to encourage each other on the journey. We come together to be renewed in hope.

I see this hope week after week here at Covenant. It's like the church is a cradle of hope.

I see hope in the interactions of people, with warm greetings and genuine caring. I've seen this happening several times this week.

I see hope being planted in our children, as they learn about God's love in Jesus Christ in Sunday School, and as they sign up for the Christmas pageant, where dozens of kids will enact the narrative of Jesus' birth, bringing hope to the world.

I see hope, as we help our youth wrestle with difficult questions of life through the lens of faith, while learning to care for others.

And I see hope in the mission work that we do and that we support with our dollars.

Given the recent revelations of so many men being abusive and inappropriate, I am really glad that our church has been a long and faithful supporter of Domestic Abuse Intervention Services here in Madison. Their work is hard, but it gives me hope.

And I'm really glad that we have been supporting the work of Sandi and Brian Thompson Royer in Guatemala, who are helping Guatemalan find their voices

and stand up to domestic violence. Brian emailed me about one woman who wrote:

There is a lot of devaluation of the women in Guatemala. When they are born just because they are a girl, there is no party, there is no happiness but the opposite. There is disappointment and resignation. We suffer verbal, sexual, economic and psychological violence.

Jesus was born to bring new life and new hope to the world, to everyone, especially to those who are too often forgotten, abused, and hurting.



With workshops and seminars, Brian and Sandi are changing lives, with new life and new hope. This same woman wrote:

That is why the domestic violence and sexual abuse workshops are very important for our Guatemalan women, so we can break the silence that is around all of these stories. We want a different life for our girls and women that suffer violence.

These women are becoming people of hope. It is hard work and it takes time.

So we enter into the journey of Advent again, with just three more Sundays until Christmas. Our Advent devotional helps us make the journey, and in the first few days, we read about Advent calendars.



We have an Advent calendar at our house. Each day there is an ornament to be displayed, as we journey toward Christmas. Sometimes all the ornaments mysteriously appear very early in December.

But the idea is that each day we add an ornament, to help remember the story of the birth of Jesus, of God's breaking into the world.

The idea of an Advent calendar and of Advent in general is to give us time and space to be renewed in the Good News, that God is coming into the world, into our church, into our hearts, into our homes. Day by day, week by week, year by year, we open ourselves to God's transforming love.

Even with all the chaos and sadness and suffering in our world and in our lives, God is bringing new life and new hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.