

Sunday, December 3, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

**SERMON**

**Finding Hope in the Shadowed Place**

**Mark 13:24-37**

**INTRODUCTION:**

Today's Gospel reading for this first Sunday of Advent is frankly, kind of surprising. Instead of Angels appearing to say, "Do not be afraid", or hopeful ancient prophecies of God's comfort and renewed divine presence, we are reading about the **end of time** and God's final judgment on the earth! Jesus describes the total collapse of the present world order and the establishment of God's realm.

It all started when the disciples Peter, James, John and Andrew were quietly sitting with Jesus on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the holy temple. They had been admiring it's architectural magnificence the and it's structural integrity. Jesus then tells them, "There will not be one stone left sitting upon another. It will all be thrown down."

The disciples must have been quite surprised by this doomsday response, so they asked, "When? When will these things be, and what will be the sign when it's about to happen?" Jesus then goes on for 19 verses, painting a vivid picture of a world gone mad, plagued with violence, wars, famines, and powerful natural disasters. He says that Christians in particular will be hated, persecuted, and even put on trial for their faith. It is a miserable forewarning.

And only then, Jesus says, will God intervene.

Hear this prophetic teaching from Jesus, who continued, saying:

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"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 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."

The Word of God for the people of God...



Happy New Year! Today marks the first day of the Christian year, beginning with the season of Advent. You might think the year would begin with the trumpets like Easter, or the stillness of Christmas Eve, or the excitement of Pentecost – but no, we begin Advent in the shadows of despair, war, sorrow, and hate, and this way of beginning is really very important. For it's precisely in the shadow of despair that the God of grace arrives, and it's precisely here that God's church is called to light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love against those shadows. This is deep poetry and it's worth remembering. Our year begins in a shattered and shaken world, a world where hope is fading on a distant horizon. Even as darkness threatens to swallow up the light, we are called not to flee from the night, but to boldly enter in and wait. Even in the shadowed valley, we sing songs of hope, and to pray for the light to come.

It's interesting and significant to know that this Gospel of Mark was written around the time of the Jewish revolt against the Roman occupation in Palestine. The insurgent uprising failed and in response, the Roman army had crushed the holy temple in Jerusalem. The Holy of Holies, the sacred heart of Jewish faith had been thoroughly sacked and lay in ruins. Hope, for the original readers of Mark, seemed like a cruel joke, an emotional denial of what was really happening. Clearly the death-dealing forces held all the power and ruled the day. Yet, from this place of trauma and despair Mark proclaims good news. Even here, a dramatic rescue is immanent. Even as the dust of a fallen temple settles, Jesus says God is on the move. The Son of Humanity is coming to recalibrate the scales of justice. Everything will be turned upside down. The lowly will be lifted up and the mighty will be brought down from their thrones.

Jesus tells us that this darkness is the sign that God's revolution is taking place and that we are to enter into the shadows of despair, war, sorrow and hate with candles of light that proclaims a hope far beyond military might. This is where Advent begins, acknowledging that things are not as they should be, admitting that we live in a broken world in need of healing but we know that it is the sign that God is on the way to make things right. This is the deeper hope of Advent, a hope that overcomes all of the shadowed places of our lives, God is on the move. We are defiant against the darkness and so we light our single flame, knowing that the darkness will never comprehend the light.

Christmas is coming, so let us each add our light in whatever way we can. We will stand against the darkness, give extravagantly to those in need, love fiercely in the presence of hate and live into the light hope. We will watch, wait and prepare for the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, God in us. Love always wins.

Jesus did not leave us with this vision of apocalyptic terror. He left us with a foretaste of the banquet that is yet to come and this is where our hope is rooted. Communion is the story of God's promise of liberation over the bondage of darkness and death. Forgiveness, Jesus says, is the way to redemption and forgiveness is what communion represents. So let us begin our journey of hope by coming to the table to be nourished with the radiant hope that is surly coming.