

## Advent 1B 2020 Sermon

### *Mark 13:24-37*

*Jesus said, "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."*

My email inbox has been overloaded for the past two weeks with pre-Black Friday, Black Friday, and extended Black Friday ads. "Final Days! Black Friday prices ending soon!" "Last chance to save! Up to 70% off until MIDNIGHT! Don't miss out!"

Now, I don't begrudge the retailers who have to make a living. I am very aware that several venerable retailers – Lord & Taylor, Neiman Marcus, and J.C. Penney among them – have gone bankrupt this past year.

But I **would** like to raise the question about what all the frenzied hype around Thanksgiving football games and parades and Black Friday sales does to our souls and spirits, what it does to our focus: what we see and pay attention to at Thanksgiving and in the weeks leading up to Christmas, this season of Advent. I wonder if all the frenzy doesn't draw us – our focus and our consciousness – outside ourselves, outside our center in God? I wonder if it doesn't distract us from the *true* meaning of Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas? I wonder if the hype and frenzy doesn't stir up anxiety and impatience inside, instead of Peace on Earth, good will toward men? After all, what if we miss out on the opportunity to buy that new TV or computer or sweater or whatever at an unheard-of price, the deal of a lifetime?

In the middle of all these frantic voices and images bombarding us from our television and computer screens, the season of Advent comes as a wonderful **gift** – a gift that, in the words of one poet, helps “us restore that quietness, that inner peace, that willingness to wait unfulfilled in the dark, in the midst of a season that conspires to do nothing but fling bling and tinsel at us right through December.”<sup>1</sup>

And **this** year, my friends, provides a *special* opportunity for us to experience the fullness of Advent and its gift, since, because of the surging pandemic in our community, state, and nation, some of that outer frenzy has been – necessarily – removed. This year, many of us (myself included) are not fighting the crowds in the airports. We are not waiting in line for hours in the cold in front of Walmart or Target, in order to have a chance to buy that “doorbuster” deal. We are not exhausting ourselves by preparing huge Thanksgiving meals for a crowd of relatives or friends. Even one of the Thanksgiving Day football games had to be postponed – twice! – because some of the players had contracted COVID-19. As a result, many of us who had planned on watching that game in front of the television on Thanksgiving Day had to find somewhere else to focus our attention during those hours – perhaps visiting with, or calling, a family member or friend. Perhaps reflecting on all that we have to give thanks for.

We *think* we know what the holidays are about; but there is so much we **don’t** know about the meaning of Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas, and the spiritual gifts they offer. And we won’t discover the mystery at the depths of these holidays if our attention and focus is constantly distracted by all the busyness and diversions of this season, without taking time to hit the “pause” button.

Over these past 10 months or so, our world has been turned upside down. Perhaps the stars aren’t falling from heaven, as Jesus describes with apocalyptic imagery in today’s Gospel; but it is not an exaggeration to say that the ground under our feet has been shaken. The temptation for us, in this unprecedented holiday season, is to want to return speedily to the way things have always been in the past. Return to the familiar.

But that is *not* the message of today’s Gospel. “In those days, after that suffering,” Jesus says, “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.” It is an apocalyptic image of a former reality passing way, and a new reality, characterized by the Son of Man, the Human One, coming in power and glory to reveal the Kingdom of God in its fullness. (“Revealing” is what the word “apocalypse” *really* means, despite Hollywood’s distorted use of that term.)

We tend to think that Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel describe a moment at the end of time, the end of the world; but as New Testament scholar David Lose points out, “there is no mention in [in today’s Gospel] of the end of the world, no

indication of final judgment... Most of the apocalyptic writings in the Bible do not predict what will literally happen at the end of the world, but rather describe, in dramatically symbolic and cosmic terms, the earth-shaking events which are *already* happening, or are soon to happen, in the [author's and reader's] *own* day and time – events which will have such an impact on the current culture that the world can never be seen or engaged again in quite the same way.”<sup>2</sup>

And, my friends, is that not where we are, today? So much of what is happening today is unprecedented in our lifetimes: an unprecedented pandemic which has infected over 10 million Americans, killed over 260,000 of us, and permanently disabled unnumbered others. Record fires in California and Colorado. A record hurricane season. Glaciers and polar ice melting. Racial prejudice coming to light in a way that cannot be ignored. A polarization of our American society to a degree we have *never* seen. Distrust of our electoral process, rejection of scientific data and advice. Loss of jobs and livelihood, bankruptcies, being distanced from those we love. Jesus' words about the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light, and stars falling from heaven are a pretty good symbolic description of what we have been going through in our world this past year.

The question is: Will we allow the apocalyptic events of these past 10 months to “have such an impact on our current culture that the world can never be seen or engaged again in quite the same way?” Will we *grow* from these apocalyptic events; or are we so determined to get back to the way things were and the way we have always looked at things that we refuse to learn the lessons hidden in the events of this time, refuse to allow our worldview to change, our consciousness to change, our minds to change, our kingdoms to change? Will we be so determined to stabilize the old earth which is crumbling under our feet that we will not see the “Son of Man coming in the clouds” or coming in the manger or coming in the ordinary events and people of our daily lives?

“Heaven and earth [the world as we know it] will pass away,” Jesus says, “but my words will not pass away.” John Shea explains, “It is the words of Jesus, words that are creating an alternative way to be human, that are bringing [down heaven and earth, the world as we have known it]. These words are the new reality, and they will not pass away.”<sup>3</sup>

What *are* these words of Jesus which bring about this new reality? We know them well enough: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for **theirs** is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... the merciful...the pure in heart... the peacemakers... those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.” Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you. Love your neighbor as yourself.” *These* are the words of Jesus which will never pass away. And they create a **new** reality, a new consciousness, a new world which is quite different from the one that has been crumbling under our feet.

Advent is that time when we watch, and work, and waken to this new world which is being revealed out of our current darkness.

AMEN

1 Guite, Malcolm. *Waiting on the Word*, Canterbury Press Norwich. Kindle Edition.

2 David Lose, "Advent 1 B: A Present-Tense Advent" Posted: 27 Nov 2017 07:50 AM PST

<http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/advent-1-b-a-present-tense-advent/>

3 John Shea, *Following Love into Mystery*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, p. 20