

Text: Mark 13.24-37

The gospel of Mark’s first audience were living in tough times. Roman occupation had led to whispers of revolt among the people of Jerusalem, and those whispers eventually rose into acts of rebellion, and that rebellion led to overwhelming repression by the Romans. The uprising was put down in a brutal manner, and the capstone of the suppression of that rebellion was the utter destruction of the temple. They were terrible times with in-fighting among the rebel forces, siege and starvation and pestilence... It had all the signs of the end of times proclaimed by the prophets.

So, they had that in common with the people Isaiah was sent to some 700 years earlier. Change the soldiers’ uniforms a bit, and they’d been through the same experience. They too had come under siege and they’d seen their temple destroyed. It’s very difficult for us to get what that meant to these people. The temple wasn’t just a nice building, it wasn’t just the place they gathered to worship; it was God’s home among them. It was the sign that God had chosen to live with them, to champion and support them. And when it was razed to the ground it was like God was gone, like the enemy had destroyed their God; or God had turned his back on them and left the building, left the country, left the people.

And as they were led into exile, the best sense they could make of it was to read the whole thing as God’s punishment for the way they’d forgotten God’s priorities and fell into sin and selfishness. They figured God was exceedingly angry with them; and this seemed like the end of the world to them too... I suppose—in a quant way—the people of Mark’s time could look back on the people of Isaiah’s time and see that it wasn’t.

At least since the time of Isaiah people had been looking for certain “signs” indicating that the end times were beginning. In recent months I’ve heard folks saying similar things. We’ve had wars and rumors of war, we’ve had famines and storms and earthquakes and seen the sun darkened in the sky. I’ve heard people talk of sacrilege in the churches, I’ve heard them liken our world to Sodom and Gomorrah, I’ve heard political leaders—from both major parties—called the anti-Christ, I’ve heard people say that all the signs are lined up and the end must surely be near. And we—like the people of Isaiah’s day—and like the people of Jesus’ day—cry out: “How long O Lord? When will the end be and what are the signs that these things will come to pass?”

When will God come to put all things right? When will God once again tear open the heavens and step out of the clouds with power like when God came to Moses on the mountain amid thunder and lightning and smoke and billowing clouds. When will God come and save us like when he performed works of astonishing power in Egypt to free the slaves, like when he fought our battles for us, like when he saved us from catastrophe in the past. When?

That’s the question the disciples put to Mark’s Jesus on the steps of the temple some 40 years before the Romans destroyed it. Jesus had already promised his followers that he’d come again in the glory of his Father with the holy angels... But when? How long? What will the signs be? And I don’t know if you noticed, but these are exactly the questions Jesus didn’t answer. He said, “You want signs... you’ll see wars and hear rumors of war... but that’s not a sign of the end. There will be famines and earthquakes and persecutions and strange goings on in the sky... but those aren’t the signs your looking for either. There will be a desolating sacrilege in the holy temple—and you’d better head for the hills when that happens—but it doesn’t mean the end is upon you. There will be false prophets and false teachers... don’t trust them, but don’t take them as ‘the sign.’ You want to know ‘when?’ Well, the truth is I don’t know... nobody knows the time, not the angels, or the Son, but only the Father.”

Think of how deflating that must have been for his disciples. They wanted to know when... and Jesus shrugs his shoulders and says, “beats me.” But he does offer them something

here. It's like he's answering the question they didn't ask... but probably should have. He seems to answer the question: "How should we live every day from now until the time you return in glory?" I went through this chapter and I highlighted all the times Jesus told his disciples to do something while he was not answering their question about signs and when... and you hear it rolling in the background of his response like distant thunder. He says: "Beware, don't be alarmed, beware, proclaim the good news, don't worry, endure. Pray, be alert, be ready, don't be led astray. Beware, keep alert; keep awake... keep awake!"

Those are the things he implores his followers to do throughout this chapter. That's how he responds to their question—or the question they should have asked. And there's one other kind of odd thing in there... He tells them to learn the lesson from the fig tree... that when it starts to sprout leaves you know that summer is near. And he says, "Just so, when you see all these things taking place, you know that Son of Man is near, at the very gates."

And I've always thought that was a confusing thing to say, because these things are always taking place—always have been—but he hasn't returned yet in all his power and glory... at least not so much as we can see. But what if he's telling us to remember—whenever we hear of wars and rumors of war, whenever we hear of famines and persecution, whenever there are odd and frightening happenings in the heavens, whenever false prophets and messiahs arise—that he is near, not just coming soon, but near now. What if even those things that frighten us can become signs of his nearness and his presence... right now, right here among all the nastiness of this life?

That's the thing about Advent. It's not just about recalling the story of people waiting for the birth of Jesus in the past. And it's not just about waiting for his coming to save us in the future. It's about holding on to those two truths even as we recognize that he is near us—with us—today; comforting us, bringing hope, giving us strength—he's here among us saving us today amid all the calamities and crises of life.

What Jesus is doing here is transforming these chaotic events—that naturally rise up again and again in every generation—from speculative signs of his coming in the future to reminders of his presence in our now. I don't buy into that idea that God sends disasters as punishment or warnings to shake us out of complacency; bad stuff happens from time to time—sometimes to very good people, and for no good reason that we can see—but even in those times we can remember that God is good and God is near us and God is with us even through the most frightening ordeals we face.

In a way, I suppose, Jesus has at least partially answered their question about what the signs are. What he's done is taken all the events that had—for centuries—been considered signs of the ends of time when God would finally come again, and he transformed them into signs of his constant nearness. It's like he's said, "Go ahead, be hopeful for the day when I return in power and glory—because I certainly will—but don't let your waiting slip into some perverse crystal ball-gazing addiction." That kind of gloomy tunnel-focus on the future can make us blind to the present. If we spend our Advent searching for signs and "decoding" scripture that was never en-coded in the first place, and staring into the heavens, crying out "When, O Lord?" we're very likely to miss the fact that when is now.

And that's the truth of Advent: we don't want to let the fact that we're awaiting something wonderful blind us to the fact that that something—that someone—wonderful is with us even today. May we wait patiently, and may we remain awake and alert to the God who is not just coming to save us in the end, but is with us even now, through every moment, every blessing, and every crisis of our lives. And may we share that truth through acts of love for all

those who cry out, “When, O Lord;” may we be his nearness and his presence to them, through his power and to his glory. Amen