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Watching and Waiting
Mark 13:24-37

4 *"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,*

25 *and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

26 *Then they will see "**the Son of Man coming in clouds**" with great power and glory.*

27 *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.*

28 *"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.*

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

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

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

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

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

34 *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.*

35 *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,*

36 *or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.*

37 *And what I say to you I say to all: **Keep awake**."*

The **news** lately seems a little **apocalyptic**—

so much hurt, violence, chaos, disaster and destruction.

It's not surprising that some wonder whether we are entering the 'end times' or the last days on earth!

Mark's chapter 13 is known as a '**little apocalypse**', because it too talks of signs of the **end**,

how things are *bad*, and going to get *worse*,
all before the *Messiah* comes.

Apocalypse in Greek just means ‘*an uncovering*’,
a disclosure of *knowledge or a revelation*.
It has come to mean a revelation about the *end of time*.

Some Christians treat these type of writings,
such as those found in Daniel or the Book of Revelation,
as *precise predictions* of the future, and the end times.
But in Mark’s gospel, this is a statement about what the *end will look like*,
how *God is working* in it,
and the *coming of a Savior*.

Mark 13 starts with Jesus *foretelling the destruction* of the Temple in
Jerusalem, which did happen at the hands of the Romans in 70 A.D..
Jesus then warns that we will see *wars*, earthquakes, and famines at the
beginning of the end, then *believers* will be persecuted,
and *false* messiahs and prophets will come.

In our verses today Jesus continues by
predicting the coming of the *Son of Man*,
and He compares a budding *fig tree* nearing summer
to our expectation of the Savior.
He ends by reminding us to *keep awake*,
for *no one knows* the day or hour when the Son of Man will appear.

It’s all very mysterious and somewhat *scary* to think about,
the end times, the second coming,
people suffering even more than what we see today!

So *why* are we *starting the church year* with a “little apocalypse”?
That is after all, what today is—it’s the first Sunday of *Advent*,
the beginning of a new church year.
It’s the season of *waiting and watching*,
for Jesus.

So why talk of the *end at the beginning*?
Well, what if the end we’re describing,

is *also a new beginning* for all creation?
 When *Jesus comes again*, in the midst of all the suffering,
 it will be *an end* to time as we know it,
 but the *beginning* of an eternal life
 that is better than we could ever imagine!

Mark's chapter 13 "little apocalypse" is about the *arrival of Jesus*—
 the Christ child who has already appeared,
 and His *second coming*, which is yet to be seen.

That's what kind of time we live in right now—
 the *already/not yet* kind of time.

Advent always begins with these end times readings in the Bible,
 because they remind us to be expectant, hopeful,
 watching and waiting for our Savior.

Advent means *coming*,
 And because it's *Jesus* who is coming, we can wait and watch with hope!

We use the *color purple* to remind us of his royal birth,
 but it is also the color for preparation and penance.
 It is the same color we use at *Lent*,
 for the remembrance of Jesus' *Passion*—his death and crucifixion.

In fact, Mark 13 is *just before Jesus' Passion* in the Gospel of Mark.
 The *end* of Jesus' life was the *beginning* of new life for all who believe.
 See where we're going? The *end is a beginning*.
Looking for Jesus is already, and not yet!

This Gospel of *Mark* was likely the *first* Gospel,
 Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source.
 Mark was likely written during the *late 60s* A.D.,
 which means it would have been written during a time of
Nero's persecution of Christians, and the *Jewish Revolt* against Rome,
 that ended with the *destruction of the Temple* in Jerusalem in 70 A.D..
 It was written during *difficult, scary times* for the people of God.
Kind of like today can be difficult and scary for believers as well!

Teresa and I were just talking this week about the ***change in culture***, even over the past 10-20 years.

It used to be that ***Sundays were church days*** for most people, and the ***ethics governing public behavior*** were drawn from Judeo-Christian morals, like the ten commandments.

But we've ***lost much of those two things***, haven't we?

Today ***Sundays are not*** just church days, for many people Sunday is for shopping, leisure, working, or sports. Our culture ***no longer considers Sunday*** to be sacred, or reserved for worship.

And I don't even need to tell you how the ***ethics*** of public behavior have changed, right?

So ***where is the Good News*** in all this?

Well, we are waiting on the ***return of Jesus***.

We believe he is coming back,

Just as it is promised in the gospels and the writings of the New Testament, and foretold by many of the Old Testament prophets.

We can ***wait with hope***,

Because we have the ***Word*** of God,

and we know that one of these days

it will be the ***end*** of days and the ***beginning of eternal life*** with Jesus Christ!

That's great news!

The ***other Good News*** as I see it is that

today Christians who are active in church have ***CHOSEN to be at church***, in a world full of many other choices.

It means that people who are joining churches today, who attend church today are usually doing it not just because it's the social thing to do, or good to be seen here, or a good place to network.

They are here because of their ***relationship with Jesus Christ***.

They are here because their ***faith is the foundation*** of their lives, and they choose to participate in a Christian family of faith.

This is ***great news*** if you ask me.

It's ***not*** to say that earlier generations of church goers were ***less faithful***, only that at one time people were ***expected*** to be at church,

and now they're not.

Today it's a very **conscious choice**, in a world of other choices.

Advent is about **making those kinds of choices**.

We choose at Advent **who and what we are waiting and watching** to see!

We choose to be **hopefully expectant for Jesus**.

And we are choosing to **actively wait**.

Passive waiting is waiting for your bus or plane to arrive.

Active waiting is a **little kid** hiding around the corner on Christmas morning, about to jump out and see all the gifts under the tree!

Active waiting is a **groom** waiting on his bride to walk down the aisle!

Our **Advent wreath** that we light each week is very **symbolic** of our waiting—the wreath reminds us of **faith**, and the **neverending love of God**, and each **candle** each week has meaning.

They symbolize **Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love**.

We believe these are **God's gifts** to us,

But also the gifts we are asked to **bring to others** during Advent.

Isn't that great news?

As we wait, we **are blessed** with these gifts, and **asked to bless** one another.

Talk about **getting beyond the commercialism** of Christmas,

what if we sat down and thought about how to bring some **hope, peace, joy, and love** to those around us this year??

Advent is about waiting --for Jesus!

But we choose how we wait, right?

We can wait in **fear, or in faith**.

Our **world** assumes we wait for the future

with a certain amount of **fear and anxiety**, right?

Some churches and Christians have equally capitalized on the fear of the end times, or being 'left behind'.

But **Jesus** teaches us to wait in **faith and hopeful expectation**.

Sure, we will endure tough times, we are already enduring tough times.

But we hold onto the **promises** of God found in the Bible,

just as Jesus reminds us here in Mark 13, when he says in verse 31:

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

We can hold onto the promise of Jesus' second coming,

and the redemption of all creation.
 But we also hold onto the promise that
God is at work in our crazy world right now,
 regardless of how chaotic it might seem.

Jesus announced the ***kingdom*** of God in his preaching,
 a kingdom that ***began*** with him here on earth,
 and will ***continue*** into eternity when he comes again.
 So we Christians can ***wait and watch for God at work*** all around us!
 That's a ***faithful***, not fearful waiting.

So we can wait in fear and anxiety,
 Or we can wait in faith.

Hebrews 11 says that ***faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
 the evidence of things not seen.***
 We may ***not see God's hand*** all the time,
 but we have ***faith that God is working*** in our world,
 and will eventually bring it to ***redemption.***

So in Advent, we are waiting for the birth of Jesus,
 And for him to come again.
 And as we wait, we are called to ***be awake***—to the presence of God.
Not sleep-deprived because we are caught up in the commercialism of
 Christmas, and all the shopping, parties, gifts, decorating and meals!

Where will we find Jesus?
 Where have you already seen him this season?

Remember the ***Matthew 25 reminder*** that whenever we serve the needy,
 or the ***least of these***, we are serving Jesus himself?
 That means we find Jesus in people who are
hungry, thirsty, naked, strangers, or prisoners.
 And in people whose hunger or thirst or imprisonment is ***less obvious***,
 but no less real.
 In other words, ***We find Jesus in our neighbors—all of them.***

But how do we ***see Jesus clearly*** in Advent?
 Don't we have to ***stop long enough to look and listen?***

Stop—in the middle of all the shopping, meals, decorating, and stress
 That's why Advent worship is so special and important,
 because we stop, and we're reminded in worship of the **promises** of God,
 and the real **meaning** of Christmas.

And what about **daily quiet time?**
 wherever and whenever it might be,
 when you can just be alone with God, alone with your Bible,
 with your prayers.
 Isn't that equally important?
 Time you can not only **talk** to God,
 but also **listen** to what Jesus is saying to you.

Seeking God is **not** just another thing you should
 add to your **'to-do' list** for Christmas.
 This is the very thing that helps everything else go smoothly.
 Our time in worship, and our time alone with God
 is the thing that helps us **prioritize** everything else during Advent.
 It's what helps us answer these questions at Christmastime:
what is important? What should I be doing? What should I stop doing?

Worship and time with God is also the very thing
 that enables us to **interact with all the difficult** family members,
 the drama and hurt that so often accompany Christmas.
 Anyone got any of that in your family?
 I know we sure do!

If we are grounded in our relationship with Jesus,
 it's so much easier to see other people,
 even the most hurtful and annoying,
as children of God.
 And you know, that just might be one of your **best Christmas gifts** ever, right?

Finding God in Advent is what helps us endure suffering,
 for we believe that our Savior was born into the world,
 in the midst of suffering.
 And all that we endure now is nothing compared to the glory we will have one
 day with Him.

Listen to a great statement about the meaning of Christmas,
from Pastor Tim Keller:

If Jesus Christ is actually God come in the flesh,

Look at what God has done to get you to know him personally.

If the Son would come all this way to become a ***real person*** to you,
don't you think the Holy Spirit will do anything...

to make Jesus a ***real person to you in your heart?***

Christmas is an ***invitation by God:***

Look what I've done to come near to you.

Now draw near to Me.

I don't want to be a concept;

I want to be a friend.

Tim Keller, "Why Christmas Matters," Relevant Magazine (12-10-11)

Look what God has done to come near to us!

He sent us Jesus.

May we seek and find HIM this Christmas!

Friends hear the ***Good News of the Gospel:***

Advent is our time of ***waiting and watching---***in ***faith and hope,***

For our Savior Jesus.

May we find him in our ***neighbors,***

and faithfully await the day he ***comes again,*** to redeem all creation.

In the name of the One who comes at Christmas, Amen.