



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 1 (B)

Bearing Witness

[RCL]: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Advent—that wondrous season of longing, penitence, and expectation—is upon us. The Advent candles and the purple or blue altar linens and vestments are pulled from their closets. This season is one of introspection and fasting, all in the service of entering into an embodied dramatization of the birth of Jesus through liturgical rhythms.

In the coming weeks, the Advent readings will walk us through the story of John the Baptizer and continue on to the angel Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary. But before the heavenly hosts show up, before the shepherds find the baby in the manger, the lections point us to the apocalyptic. Traditionally, Advent is a period when the church dons bi-focal lenses: reenacting the great yearning and expectation for the Messiah articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures while simultaneously looking to the second coming of Jesus.

That first sense of longing is felt in the lyrics of today’s psalm, where three times the refrain is voiced, “Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.”

The weight of anticipation for divine deliverance is perhaps even more keenly pronounced in the passage from Isaiah 64: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” The desperation of the prophet is almost palpable. It is a cry that can only emerge from a place of anguish and desolation. And it is a cry that reverberates today in the hearts of all those suffering oppression, war, or injustice: God, when will you return? When will the second coming of Jesus take place? When will you rend the heavens and come to liberate us all?

The gospel reading for today from Mark addresses just this question. Initially, Jesus seems to give the disciples portents or signs of his return with a picture of apocalyptic terror. At the end of all things, what theologians refer to as the *eschaton*, there will be suffering. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not be giving its light. The stars will fall from heaven. He then offers a horticulture analogy. Just as the ripe fig heralds summer, Jesus says, “When you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

And yet as soon as Jesus indicates that there might be clues that the end is truly nigh, he takes it all back. He says, “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.” Not even Jesus knows! And if not even Jesus knows, then how could anyone correctly predict the portents and signs and omens? Here, what seemed like a teaching of interpreting prophecies of signs now shifts through this last bit of the passage. The instruction is not to spend time and energy trying to make predictions of the future, but instead, the injunction is to keep watch.

But what does this keeping watch mean, if not to interpret the signs? Jesus, as he so often does, offers a parable. He describes a landowner going away on a journey and commanding the doorkeeper to keep watch. The doorkeeper is instructed to stay awake, but there is no indication of when the landowner might return. Jesus concludes this parable by instructing the disciples, “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.”

But this is an impossible task. One cannot keep constant vigilance without fatigue. And yet, three times in this passage, Jesus instructs his disciples: Keep watch.

New Testament scholar Leroy Huizenga points out that this injunction in Mark 13 to keep watch is literally connected to the events that unfold in the Garden of Gethsemane one chapter later. The temporal pattern of the owner’s return is not of a twenty-four-hour system but of evening, midnight, cockcrow, or dawn. This four-part division of time mirrors the events of Jesus’ final night: the last supper in the evening, the arrest in the night, denial by Peter at cockcrow, and delivery to Pilate in the morning. Furthermore, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus thrice tells his close disciples to keep watch with him. And thrice they fail. They fail to stay awake with him in his final hours.

So, what’s Mark doing here? What do the events of Gethsemane have to do with the end times? What does Jesus’ arrest and death have to do with the apocalyptic? Mark is setting up this literary mirror to let the reader know that the apocalypse is wrapped up in something bigger than knowing when the End will come.

Keeping watch does not mean paying attention so one can be “in the know” about what is happening or what will happen next. The call to be watchful, alert, and aware is an invitation into the unfolding divine mystery. This mystery is somehow personal yet universal, offering glimpses of a boundless God amongst a groaning creation.

At the crux of human finitude and divine transcendence sits a holy uncertainty. Mark makes it clear that it is impossible to fix our eyes on the moment of the Messianic return. And in that uncertainty, we fix our eyes on the one thing we can: The person and promise of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Incarnation is impossible to disentangle from the mystery of the eschaton, which is, in turn, impossible to disentangle

from the mysteries of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Fixing our eyes on Jesus means embracing these mysteries in all their fullness and in their incomprehensibility.

This Advent, let us heed this call to keep watch both spiritually and also within the physical world. Jesus directs us to keep watch in Gethsemane. He directs our gaze to the anguish around us: to the destruction of the temple; to the horrors of war; to the anxieties borne from all threats to human life. In this holy uncertainty, Christians are called to be attentive to the suffering of the present. The failure of the apostles in Gethsemane becomes our failure when we turn our gaze away from those in anguish.

Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge notes that, as an Advent people, the church is called both to wait and to bear witness. She writes, “Bearing witness is an active stance; waiting is a passive stance. Both are part of the message of the herald of the age to come.”

In keeping watch—in entering into solidarity with the sick, imprisoned, and oppressed—we will find ourselves waiting in the depths crying out, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” But our gaze is directed not only at Gethsemane but to the promise of the resurrected Messiah: That suffering, death, and agony will not have the final say. And for that promise, we also keep watch. As a church and as an Advent people, we bear witness to that promise together. There will be suffering around us. There will be pain. There will be anxiety. And in those moments of feeling like the world is crumbling around us, there comes a whisper of Messianic hope: Keep watch.

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