

SERMON- Advent I (B)
Charles R. Cowherd

Good Shepherd
November 29, 2020

Isaiah 64:1-9 ————— 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 ————— Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 ————— Mark 13:24-37

OPENING:

The scene is probably a familiar one to most: the family is on a long car ride, perhaps a vacation. The destination is still far off, and the kids in the back seat are getting restless. They begin to ask: “Are we there yet?”

The parents answer calmly, “No, not yet, we will be there in a little bit.”

“Are we there yet?” “Are we there yet?—the question continues mile after mile:

“Are we there yet?” “Are we there yet?”

In my family growing up, that question was eventually outlawed on all long car rides! Now as a parent, I wonder: How do you explain something that will indeed happen... but not until after some interminable and undefined waiting period.

GOSPEL

There’s a similar dynamic going on between Jesus and his disciples in our Gospel story. The disciples are poised, they have been preparing for the climactic moment of Christ’s ministry. They are brimming with excitement and anticipation and they are ready to get “THERE.” They have even consulted the best prophetic literature and looked to the stars to confirm their belief that what they have been looking for and striving for is right around the corner.

And so, they ask: “Are we there yet?”

Jesus’ response is kind of confusing: if the disciples were kids in the back of the car, they might not be able to make complete sense of the talk of figs and stars falling and the Son of Man coming in clouds.

Easier to understand, is Jesus’ calm guidance stressed in the final paragraph::

“Watch”: Jesus advises us.

Simply “Watch” and

Wait..... AND

Watch.

Or, as our translation has it: “Keep alert” “Beware” “Keep awake”

5 times in 4 verses, he offers that advice.

These are our Advent instructions, as we move into the new Church year, and into this Season of Advent. “Wait” and “Watch.”¹

¹ Mark Myette, “WATCH! Mark 13:24-37” *Advent Devotion for Christmas Eve*.

WAITING:

I feel like that might strike you as either bad news or good news.

It's good news because by now, you should be pretty good at waiting, that's all we have been doing this year: waiting, waiting for the numbers to go down so we can get back into the church, waiting for news on the vaccine, waiting for your tests results so you can safely visit your family, waiting for election returns, waiting for some glimpse of normalcy to return.

In 2020, all we do is wait.

So it might be bad news, because you might very well be sick of all that waiting and much prefer for it to be 'here.' A long car ride does not tend to make children better at it through experience, rather impatience increases with every passing mile.

So, it's a particular type of waiting and watching that we are called to, and need to nurture and develop. It's the same type as every year, but heightened in this one. We need to wait with honesty and intention and repentance and hope, waiting and watching for the Once and Future King.

I will give three stories about waiting and watching, these are stories that we all need as children in the backseat, in this long car ride of 2020.

STONEMASON:

First, there is the old story involving three stonemasons in the Middle Ages who were hard at work. One day, a visitor came along and asked them what they were doing. The first stone mason was hard at work, sweat pouring down his brow. "I am squaring the corners of this stone," he grumbled. The second stone mason, though less distraught, responded with a deep sigh, "I'm building a part of this wall." Finally the visitor asked the third stone mason who replied with a smile on his face, "I am building a beautiful cathedral that will glorify God for centuries to come."²

This Advent, this year, we need to try to reimagine our lives, the moments that we are frozen into during this period, that seemed so repetitious and soul-crushing, as one that we are doing for the glory of God.

In other words, we might ask ourselves: "Who knew that putting on a mask, washing our hands, and keeping our distances are part of building a cathedral?"³

² A. Katherine Grieb, "Quartet at the End of Time," *Virginia Theological Seminary Magazine* (Fall 2020). 37

³ Grieb, 37

ADVENT:

The second story returns to the image of a long journey, maybe a car ride or a plane ride, but I find I find the idea to be easiest understood when travelling by train. Imagine riding on a train, peering out the window, with your face pressed up to the glass hour and hour, and somehow you let the visual scene wash over you. That array of images coming into your view is repetitive but also evocative of the stunning diversity of God's creation, and your mind wonders and wanders. You are no longer asking: "are we there yet?" but instead you catch a glimpse of time unraveling at a different pace that might approximate how God sees the world. Maybe even you don't want the trip to end.

That is the sort of watchfulness that Jesus is calling us into, not a paranoia, or a hypervigilance, or a risk-management algorithm that ensures our safety and well-being. But a holy patience and attentiveness, that has a perspective that is deep and wide and oriented towards hope.

It might be helpful to think of all the most important moments of your life: going to college, starting a job, getting married, having a baby.

Are you ever ready for any of those?

NO, not entirely, the journey is too complex and the destination too far.

And would we really want to be entirely ready?

All we can do instead is *watch* and *wait*.

LONELINESS

I am conscious of the tremendous privilege that I possess by being able to give this sermon inside our church sanctuary, the privilege of my health and that of my family intact, and all the other blessings in my life.

I know that, despite all the technological marvels and lifelines that we have developed, that it's just not the same. When Jesus says "watch and wait", it's easier for some than for others.

So our final image is a tough one, because Advent always "begins in the dark"⁴ (in the famous phrase) and our readings are always a little apocalyptic on this Sunday. I can only imagine, for example, the "elderly widow (who) said that the part of church she missed the most was the peace: it was the only time during the week that someone actually touched her...."⁵

⁴ Quoting from Fleming Rutledge; see, for example: ['Advent Begins in the Dark' – The Living Church](#)

⁵ Grieb, 32.

I, for one, can't imagine that sense of loneliness.

But Jesus addresses it directly in his instructions to the disciples in our Gospel. Jesus tells his friends to "stay awake" and keep him company,

Why does he say that? Because Jesus knows, during that terrible night to follow in the Garden of Gethsemane, that they will all fall asleep in the hour of his greatest need. Sleep will overcome the disciples and Jesus will be left alone.

So maybe we can imagine ourselves as drowsy disciples wondering the garden, not knowing what to do, not being able to see the destination, not even realizing that what we are facing is "the trial brought on by the darkness of unknowing."⁶

The disciples and Mark's audience are waiting and watching for a fate where they will be separated from everyone—they "will be hated by all for the sake of Jesus' name" they will be alone and in the dark in the most profound way.⁷

CONCLUSION:

Maybe the stakes might not seem quite as high for us, that the metaphor might lose some of its power over space and time.

Perhaps, but still Jesus urges his disciples, Mark urges his readers, and we are urged, in the words of one scholar, "to embrace the world as Gethsemane: to stay awake in the darkness of history." Because.... "the world is Gethsemane, and we are called to historical insomnia."⁸

Advent begins in the dark, we light candles to pierce the dark, sequentially every week until that final burst of light that illuminates a sleepy and darkened world, that final embrace that puts an end to the humanity's loneliness, where are our waiting and watching is finally over,

where God, Emmanuel, joins us as we reach our destination,

parents can tell their children

"We are here"

"We are home"

"We are not alone."

AMEN

⁶ Myers, Ched. 2018. *Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. (Anniversary Ed.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 353

⁷ Mark 13.13

⁸ Myers, 348, 353.