

First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020

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Welcome to the New Year! The beginning of Advent signals our shift to begin the gospel cycle once again, this time in the company of Mark. You will have noticed, perhaps, that we begin this new cycle in the thirteenth chapter of Mark, not at the beginning. That's because Mark has nothing to tell us about the birth of Jesus. Instead we find ourselves starting this new year in the bewildering land of "*Already, But Not Yet.*" It's a strange place, for sure! After these last nine months we are longing for a short Advent and then a lavish celebration, Christmas lights and music and traditional gatherings, and not over Zoom! But unfortunately, not yet. *Not yet.* There is light on the horizon, *but not yet.* Instead of the soothing story we yearn for, today Mark presents a description of the end of time, and arresting statements about the end of the world. But maybe there's more than meets the eye.

The people Mark was writing for also lived in the land of *Already, But Not Yet.* They did not live in a time of pandemic, but they lived under Roman occupation, and they had experienced the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, shortly after the year 70 in the Christian Era. Their heart of hearts, that beautiful and holy place, the shelter of the Holy of Holies, the pilgrimage destination, the dwelling place of God - all desecrated and destroyed by the Roman general Titus and his armies. Jewish Zealots had fanned the fires of discontent and in the year 70, the Roman siege of Jerusalem began. It was just a few days before Passover, and thousands of people had made the pilgrimage to the holy city. Many found themselves trapped inside the walled city. And although it was not a virus that killed them, it was warfare and fire, because it was fire that finally destroyed the temple. First century estimates were that over a million people were killed over a six month period. Today, more than 1.4 million have died of COVID-19 in about a nine month period.

We have a lot in common with those first century Jews and Jewish Christians who lived in the painful and disrupted land of *Already But Not Yet.* Centuries of prophets had warned of destruction, and here it was. Surely they wondered if the horror was over after the temple was destroyed, the war over, and the iron grip of the Roman occupation clamped down upon them even more strongly. A kind of surge, of sorts. They too wondered, "Is this it, or is there more?" And Jesus had warned to watch for the signs to come, and to keep awake. "You will not know the day or the hour," said Jesus. Already a lot had happened, but the ending had not come. . . yet.

When I was rector of a small parish in one of Philadelphia's River Wards, I had a Tuesday evening Bible Study. On my way home, about a forty minute drive, I would often listen to the late Harold Camping, the host of Family Radio's *Open Forum*. At that time, a small outpost of the Family Radio franchise was located in Camden. Brother Camping broadcasted from 8:00 to 9:00 in the evening. I had huge admiration for Brother Camping, although we could not possibly have held more different theological views. But, that man knew his Bible - cold! I suppose we would call him a gnostic, that is, he believed that there were essential links between books in the Bible which, when added up, provided a vital and somewhat secretive message for those who were serious enough to follow the links. His radio program was a call-in program and no one ever stumped him. He had answers for every question and you could hear the pages of his Bible rustling as he quickly and accurately turned from book to book, quoting passages to support his answer. He made strong claims about the date and time of the Second Coming: it was to be May 21, 2011. It was easy to scoff at his calculations, derived from secret links he looked for between books of the Bible, but I have to say, I always admired the fact that Brother Camping and his followers were serious about the Second Coming of Christ. They truly lived in a sense of expectation, and as today's gospel emphasizes, they too reminded each other continuously that "no one knows the day or hour."¹

“Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again,” we say every Sunday. And this Sunday we are asked to stop and pay close attention to the Second Coming of Christ, to look for the signs, and to not only believe it, but *long for it*. But are we seeing signs now, or not? Like those first century Jews and Jewish Christians, we must admit that the *Land of Already But Not Yet* is confusing. “Look at the fig tree,” Jesus says, and he points to the natural growth cycle. So if that cycle is disturbed, is that a sign we should be noting? Regardless of what you think the causes of global warming might be, there are far reaching effects on everything from rising sea levels to destructive weather patterns, to wild fires. Could that be a sign? Is this a warning?

Alongside that discomfort, the reign of God is among us, we have come to believe. And being the hands and feet of the cosmic Christ is our vocation and ministry. We are a church on a mission to know God in Christ and to make Christ known to others. Making Christ known to others happens in so many different ways, from reaching out to others with material aid to seeking justice. So we understand our calling, and we are working on it *already*, but the fullness of the reign of God is *not yet*.

In today’s gospel, Jesus has left the temple, where he has been teaching. One of the disciples remarks on the majesty of the temple, and Jesus tells him that one day it will all be thrown down. He describes the moment when the end will actually come. Naturally the disciples want to know when this will happen, and Jesus tells them only that it is coming. He warns against misinterpreting the claims of false teachers. He tells them that they will be persecuted. Mark’s Jesus is speaking to people who know persecution and destruction firsthand. The final judgement is not mentioned here. It will surely be a part of the end times, but Mark doesn’t emphasize it, because Mark’s community has lived through a terrible earthly judgement in a devastating war and the destruction of the center of their worship, the very beating heart of their existence. Instead, Mark speaks comforting words about the gathering of God’s elect from the four corners of the world.

After the suffering, Mark says, the cosmic signs will begin. They will be unmistakable. One won’t need to wonder, “It this it?” They will be obvious and clear: “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. It is only then that “they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” And what will be the first action of the Son of Man? One of mercy toward those who are still suffering: “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.”

“Keep awake,” Jesus tells us. Continue the work God has given you to do in this Already But not Yet world. You have ministries to which you should attend, so that when the master returns you will have been working for the Reign of God come on earth. We know that we shall not escape judgement at the end. We know that we will have to account for our lives. But Jesus’s message is clear: *The Land of Already Not Yet* is a permanent state, until he comes again.

Christmas is coming, so let us all look forward with eager longing to the incarnation of Emmanuel, God with us. But let us also keep awake, which really means continue the ministry, because another joy is not quite yet. If we have been about the master’s business, the angels will come calling for us, wherever we might be, and gather us for something beyond our imagining: The Reign of God come on earth, forever.

ⁱ Mark 13:32