

LIVING IN THE BETWEEN TIMES

Mark 13:24-37

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For some reason, long ago it was decided by some Church council that purple would be the liturgical color for Advent. Purple tends to be symbolic of the solemnity and somberness which reflects the tone of the season. Traditionally, Advent is described as being a time set apart to repent and convert as well as wait and prepare for when God inevitably shows up unexpectedly. But why are we repenting and for what are we waiting?

For children in Christian homes, Advent is all about waiting for Christmas Day. When growing up, my family always had an Advent Calendar in the kitchen and every morning at breakfast one of us would open one of the twenty-five doors on the calendar, one for every day in December running up to and including Christmas Day. Each opened door revealed a Christian symbol or picture in keeping with the season.

Another way of marking time in Advent is the Advent wreath with three purple candles, one pink and one white (the Christ candle) for Christmas Eve. Interestingly the use of wreaths of evergreens and candles was in vogue in northern Europe way before the coming of Christianity. For the Nordic pagans, the evergreens symbolized eternal life and the light symbolized overcoming the quickening darkness that shrouded the cold, barren landscape of the winter solstice. The early Celtic missionaries co-opted this and other pagan customs to ease their pagan converts into Christianity, teaching them that Christ, God's only Son, is the one true light that has come into the world filled with grace and truth.

But Advent is more than counting off the days before Christmas; it's really about being aware that we live in an "in between time," between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ, when "...the Son of Man," in Jesus' own words, "will be seen by all" seated at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:62)

When you think about it, the Old Testament is a record of an earlier in between time, between Adam's fall from grace and the coming of the Messiah. Prophecies of the Messiah's coming started accelerating at the time of the prophets, particularly Isaiah, 700 years before Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Think of it, for all that time, especially the 700 years before Christ, the nation of Israel waited and waited from one generation to the next for God to finally keep his promise. In the meantime, generations of the faithful were born and died waiting for God's Anointed One to bring peace and justice to Israel and the world. Especially when times were hard, and the biblical record shows that that was most of the time, God's children would cry out, "Lord, when will the Messiah come to deliver us?" only to be answered by silence.

The last 2,000 years have been an even longer “in between time” than the first. From the moment of Christ’s ascension into heaven, the Church has expectantly waited for Christ’s Second Coming, some generations more than others depending on the situation. Here’s what I mean: in times of famine and plague, wars and persecutions, Christians, like the Jews before them, wondered, “When will Christ come again to deliver us from evil and finally establish his everlasting kingdom?” On the other hand, in times of relative peace and prosperity Christians are mostly content with the here and now and Christ’s second coming isn’t as urgently longed for.

Even so, whether we experience peace and prosperity or wars and persecutions, we need to be aware that even if we’re living the good life, somewhere in the world there are others living under tyranny and hardship. If that’s the case, maybe we shouldn’t be so content to have things go on indefinitely.

I’m not suggesting our blessings and prosperity should make us feel guilty whenever we think about others enduring tyranny, tragedy and affliction while we live the good life, but maybe we should be even more motivated to do something important that will send a message of solidarity to the saints and martyrs around the world who bravely profess Christ and carry his cross in spite of dungeon, fire and sword.

Isn’t this what Christ’s disciples, who live in relative prosperity, are called to do in this “in between time” we all find ourselves in? Our waiting needs to be punctuated with systematic deeds of kindness and acts of love as well as traditional themes of Advent, intentional and wise waiting for Christ who always comes under the radar when he’s least expected.

What does intentional and wise waiting look like? Maybe the best way to answer that question would be to first describe what sporadic, mindless waiting looks like: wandering aimlessly and carelessly, content to be undisciplined and lazy, forever blending confusion with boredom, never accomplishing anything that counts, never contributing to the common good, wracking up numerous missed opportunities and consistently wasting time because there’s no motivation to do otherwise.

Our culture celebrates people who live like this, why else would people tune in to watch Beverly Hills Housewives, except maybe to wait for the next scheduled train wreck? Even so, the truth is, unless you have something important to wait for, chances are you’ll live aimlessly and foolishly, realizing only when it’s too late that your life was wasted by living primarily for yourself.

Contrast that with intentional and wise waiting, and notice I said “wise” and not “intelligent.” A lot of intelligent people out there are too smart for their own good, because they lack wisdom. You can be both intentional and intelligent but still miss the mark because you lacked one thing: the wisdom to know the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. History records that many intentional and intelligent men built powerful empires and corporations that impacted the world but only the wise wait

expectantly for the King of the Kingdom that has no end by serving and loving the least of his brothers and sisters whenever they cross their paths.

By itself, isolated from all the rest of Christ's teachings in Mark's Gospel, this morning's Gospel reading initially appears to be a gloomy foreshadowing of what's to come. Jesus is saying this present "in between time" we live in will suddenly end when

*"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.*

Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out his angels and gather his elect...from the ends of the earth..." (Mark 10:24-27)

But who are these elect God's angels will be coming for? Are the favored fortunate few the ones who believed in the right doctrines, followed the right religion and belonged to the right church?

Or are God's requirements for salvation completely different from our preconceived notions? Would it surprise you if God's requirements for salvation aren't based on what you believe, but rather on whether or not what you believed influenced how you lived your life?

Included in this morning's Gospel reading was Jesus' reference to the lesson of the fig tree. Earlier in his Gospel, Mark records the strange story of Jesus cursing a fig tree between the time of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the incident in the Temple when he overturned the moneychangers' tables the next day in the Temple. Why was the poor fig tree cursed? Because the fig tree, bearing no fruit, symbolized the religious establishment's failure to bear the fruits of repentance and transformation. More inclined to honor outworn traditions and observing obsolete laws, instead of promoting the primary law of love, the Temple priests and scribes entered the ranks of the intentional and intelligent, but not the intentionally wise. They failed God by separating belief from practice, believing in orthodox doctrines but lacking human decency. Obsessed with their pedigree and privileges they failed to realize the greatest in God's Kingdom are those who humble themselves by loving and serving the least of these.

The big question facing us on this first Sunday in Advent isn't when will Christ come, but how will Christ come? Certainly Christ comes in one way or another every day. But will we recognize him and will we accept him? Maybe Christ will appear in a very unattractive form, as someone who requires more time and effort we initially think he's worth. Maybe Christ will reveal himself in someone completely alien to what you're used to. But isn't that how Christ comes, unannounced and unexpected, totally different, but wonderfully real, his divinity masked by our humanity?

Whether you like it or not, we are living in another one of those uncomfortable yet potentially exciting “in between” times. It’s our turn to wait for Christ, who has already come but promises to come again.

Advent was designated by the Church fathers as the time to watch and wait for Christ who has already come, and promised to come again.