

O Come, O Come

December 3, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Mark 13: 24-37

24 “But in those days, after that time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, 25 the stars will fall from the sky and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see the Promised One coming in the clouds with great power and glory; 27 then the angels will be sent to gather the chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. 28 “Take the fig tree as a parable: as soon as its twigs grow supple and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29 In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the Promised One is near, right at the door. 30 The truth is, before this generation has passed away, all these things will have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 32 “But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it—neither the angels of heaven, nor the Only Begotten—no one but Abba God. 33 Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come. 34 “It is like people traveling abroad. They leave their home and put the workers in charge, each with a certain task, and those who watch at the front gate are ordered to stay on the alert. 35 So stay alert! You do not know when the owner of the house is coming, whether at dusk, at midnight, when the cock crows or at early dawn. 36 Do not let the owner come suddenly and catch you asleep. 37 What I say to you, I say to all: keep awake!”

If you are like me, scriptures like the one I just read aren't your favorite. Come here on the first Sunday of Advent, you may expect some familiar carols, a wreath and candles, maybe a warm message of love-your-neighbor, and these days, some prayers for peace. All good, right? But come on! Do we really need all this apocalyptic jargon and this weird-sounding, end-timey Jesus harping on us all to stay awake? I mean...don't we have already enough scary stuff on our minds and souls to keep us at night? I feel ya! I do!

It's a strange start for the season, which is maybe why I've avoided it in the past and never preached it from the appointed lectionary options. But please bear with me, and bear with this text. If you were listening carefully, you may have noticed why it shows up now. “The Promised One is near ...he's coming...he's just at the door! So, let's be prepared! Let's get ready! We know we've got exactly four weeks until Christmas, when we celebrate the first coming of Jesus! Meanwhile, Mark has him here talking about the end of times and that so-called second coming. First coming? Second coming? The themes are kinda close, right, and the message fits for both. Stay alert! Be on the watch! Keep awake! One way or another, it can be like that bumper sticker puts it: “Jesus is coming! Look busy!” or something like that! Maybe, just maybe, there's *something* here to work with after all! And maybe if we stick with these super broad themes, we can steer clear of all the ominous darkening sun and moon stuff. But there is much more to this passage, and we can't just shove under the rug what we don't like at first. This is church, after all.

Besides, if you think this passage is tricky, check out what Jesus says in the verses that immediately precede our reading. They are all part of Mark's chapter 13. It's what some scholars have called “the

little Apocalypse” – dun-dun-dun! Jesus says in verse 8: “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs”. As if that’s not enough, he predicts persecution for the disciples. He even says, in verse 17: “Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! 18 Pray that it may not be in winter. 19 For in those days there will be suffering.” Woe is right! If not, woe is me, the preacher, what about “Whoa, ease up, man?!”

Let’s set this in just a bit of context. Mark was writing here about 40 or so years after Jesus died, which meant that the early church, still in scattered sects, still gathering in covert, deeply countercultural house meetings, was living under a brutal, wartime Roman occupation. So, for Mark’s listeners, hearing Jesus speak into those shadows and fears may have met them where they were. After all, their world was on fire! Their struggles and despair were as real as they get! And the people were looking for signs and new leaders wherever they could find them!

For us? I don’t know. We *could* dismiss a passage like this outright and think it has nothing to do with us. But given our headlines of late, it may seem eerily familiar if not downright timely. “Nations rising against nations,” and in the Holy Land no less, extreme weather and climate catastrophe, increasingly extremist violence and political factions, let alone an alarming rise of Christian nationalism here and elsewhere that has some of this same apocalyptic-sounding rhetoric reaching into our highest ranks of power. If not the end of times, these are, for many, the scariest of times we have lived through!

Given our wider context, our initial reactions to a text like this may be one of caution if not downright avoidance. While the text itself doesn’t call its readers to violence, it *can* sound like an almost military-style reveille. Fear and foreboding have overtaken the land, and the message is to Keep Awake! Stand vigilant! Be on guard! It seems just a step away from ‘join a neighborhood watch’ or a vigilante militia with a pathologically dualistic, you-are-with-us-or-against-us mindset. In the wrong hands, this kind of message turns dangerous very quickly. Aren’t we better off without these end-time threats? Even worse, isn’t this kind of incendiary, polarizing, hyper-religious stuff part of the problem?

I was reminded this week of a divinity school book talk I heard a few years back by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the brilliant former Chief Rabbi in the UK. He died in 2020, but I so wish he were around to offer his wisdom on current events because what he shared and wrote in his 2015 book “Not in God’s Name” could well have articulated precisely for this moment. As I’ve shared with some of you before, Sacks talked about the danger of what he calls “apocalyptic politics” which he sets apart from “prophetic politics.” He traces both as ongoing features and facts of human history. The prophet, you see, thinks in terms of normal, this-worldly history, seeks righteousness and a moral way forward, suffers setbacks, endures self-criticism, waits and presses for evil to bring about its own demise, holding fast to hope and God’s promise. Sacks sees the prophetic as “the voice of hope.” Now, listen to this: “Apocalypse”, he writes, “is the voice of despair.” In apocalyptic politics, and here he’s worth quoting at length: “Normal history has failed to bring about the long-awaited redemption. Evil, far from being an instinct *within us* that we can conquer, [becomes for the apocalyptic thinker] an independent force [something that is projected outside of us], onto those who we see as threats.” “Apocalypse,” Sacks writes, “is what happens to prophecy when it loses hope, and to politics when it loses patience....It arises at times of destabilizing change and speaks to those who feel unjustly left behind. At times of social and religious ferment, [it] spreads like contagion. Apocalyptic politics [whether secular or religious], is the search for revolution without transformation, change without the slow process of education. It uses power in place

of persuasion, daggers instead of debate. It simplifies the issue of truth to the most elemental choice: agree or die. It is the longing for the end of time in the midst of the time, the search for redemption now. That is why it suspends the normal rules that restrain people from murdering the innocent.”

I don't even need to name the parallels to some of the rhetoric, let alone the horrific realities we are seeing in our world and in our country today. We hold them right here – in our minds, hearts, and bodies every day! They are written in our prayer list! And, they already keep us awake! Scary times, to be sure. And so, back to our scripture for some much-needed resource and grounding!

You see, all of Jesus' talk of darkening suns, wars, famine, and natural catastrophes can sound like “apocalypse now,” and yet I think he is speaking to us with profound and timely prophetic hope instead! And we can ill afford to skip over these scriptures and leave them in the hands of apocalyptic thinkers and politicians in our midst who are already causing chaos, harm, and violence because Jesus offers a much-needed alternative! He ushers forth a voice of restraint and yes, if we listen for it, a voice of hope! Stay awake, he says! Keep watch, which, circling back now, I think we can and should be hearing in two ways.

First, stay vigilant and watch out for any false messiah who *is* claiming “apocalypse now”! He says, “when you hear of war and insurrections,” do not be alarmed. Don't fall for it! These are the times we most need to “be on guard” *against* fear-mongering, against dualistic and doomsday thinking. Keep awake, stay alert, and don't give into the “we're all good, they're all bad so let's blow them all away” rhetoric, the “you are with us or against us” reasoning! These are just the birth pangs of a new day and they will pass!

Instead, and here's the second way we need to hear him, it's: stay awake and anticipate that God's love and peace and justice for all God's children is ever drawing near! Notice how Jesus never says, “our redemption is now.” Instead it's “our redemption is *near!*” It's repent of the sin within, and the kingdom is *near*. He says the kingdom of God is “*at hand,*” not *in hand!* Do you see the difference? So, it's not and never will be the impatiently despairing and often violent, ultimately dualistic us/them voice of “apocalypse now” - the good survive and to hell with the rest! Instead, it's the trusting, faithful, hopeful, humble, confessing already-not-yet voice that urges us toward deep, emergent, soul-searching, inclusive transformation for every child of God! Keep awake in trust that it's coming!

Can we see the difference in tone? If not between the apocalyptic and prophetic politics then between the hyper-vigilance that keeps so many of us awake, waiting for the worst, and the faith and hope-filled waiting and wondering that our tradition commends to us to wait for in this season of Advent! What if rather than waiting for the worst to come, we should be waiting for something else entirely.

Our theme this Advent ...”O Come O Come!” O Come, O Come...what? Besides more horrendous headlines, besides more war and violence and victimization and blame and shame and pain and isolation. O Come O Comewhat else? O Come O Come...I don't even want to answer it for you! I can't answer it! But even asking the question, asking God tenderly to help you discern together what you are waiting for in this season, even leaving the question open to some genuine possibility? I wonder. Are you waiting for a deeper sense of God's presence, for some assurance of goodness in the world, for a connection to a community like this one, for some semblance of new life or new birth, for some awakening, for some emergence, for some soulful transformation? Imagine keeping awake, and

keeping watch for *that*, like in the dreary shadows of war on the eve of a peace proclamation, or in that pregnant darkness just moments before the dawn of a new day,

O Come, O Come...

Keep awake! Keep watch!

Allow me to close on a more mundane note and with a poem I shared with our staff on Wednesday. It landed in my inbox earlier that morning. Right on time. I had just finished drafting our liturgy for today and was thinking about our Advent theme. It's a contemporary translation of Meister Eckhart's words entitled "Love Does That" and it goes like this:

*All day long a little burro labors, sometimes
with heavy loads on her back and sometimes just with worries
about things that bother only
burros.*

*And worries, as we know, can be more exhausting
than physical labor.*

*Once in a while a kind monk comes
to her stable and brings
a pear, but more*

*than that,
he looks into the burro's eyes and touches her ears
and for a few seconds the burro is free
and even seems to laugh,
because love does
that.*

Love Frees.

Imagine keeping watch for just that kind of love!

A love that comes, bringing simple gifts, a gift of fruit, a nod of recognition, a touch on our skin, a moment's rest and release from our worries and our labors. O Come O Come - Emmanuel. God with us! Already not yet here! O Come, Come! Beloved, keep watch, for the Promised One is near. Amen.