

Today as your preacher

It is my job to invite you into the spirit of Advent.

The time we take each year to talk about waiting

[pause]

We reflect on our anticipation, our anxiety,

Four weeks of worship, even a special theme song!

All leading up to our celebration of one of the world's greatest events,

The the birth of Christ Jesus.

Aw shoot! I was supposed to say "Spoiler Alert"

Now I guess I've ruined the surprise, right?

This week here at Glennon Heights, this First Sunday of Advent

Feels a little out of sync with the rhythm our church life.

Tonight we put on a concert that we have been preparing and practicing for,

It's the culmination of weeks of work and fellowship,

More like a season finale than a pilot.

I don't know, maybe I'm the only one who feels this way.

But despite the few minor incongruities,

The way I'm getting into the spirit of Advent this year

Is by trying to keep it fresh,

To unleash a mystery from the tidy package of the holiday stories,

Our usual, annual, tidy narratives of Advent

That have a way of taming and softening

The wild magic of a baby born from a God,

The reckless love embodied by who Jesus became,

The violence of the powerful against the truth,

And the chaos and upheaval of the aftermath.

The verses put before us today leave little room for tidy narratives.

These verses come out of 3 of the worst disasters

That ever befell Jesus' people.

The Old Testament passages from Psalms and Isaiah

Are prayers sent up from the ashes of their capitals, Samaria and Jerusalem.

The Mark passage is thought by many scholars to relate

To the sack of Jerusalem and the desecration of the Temple

By Emperor Titus in 70 CE.

These historical events were not metaphorical.

They were cataclysms, national humiliations,

Accompanied by death and violation.

When we deal with events like these in Scripture,

We often turn them into metaphors,
Apt for relating to our own less disastrous lives
And we manage their awfulness by reassuring ourselves
That everything turns out alright.
We know the story. We know the ending.
Darkness is just what comes before the light.
Each setback is an opportunity for growth.
Things are already starting to turn around if you look closely.
Everything happens or a reason.
Well, even if I wanted to bring you a sermon like that,
Tying reassuring thoughts into a neat little bow,
These verses won't let me, folks!
And I think that might even be a good thing.
I think perhaps the silver lining of living in a time
Where fear and uncertainty are everywhere,
Where everything we thought was normal
in our government, in our streets,
Feels wrong and upside down.
I think the benefit of living in such a time

Is the ability to connect with Scripture passages that seem alien,

Inaccessible in better times.

Like Asaph, our Psalmist, we feel like those

Who have prayed to God for justice,

Have been fed with the bread of tears,

And given to drink in full measure.

We feel, like Asaph, that the nation we were proud of

Is now the scorn of nations, the laughingstock of our enemies.

We also pray for God's face to shine on our land.

Like Isaiah, we sometimes feel like things have gotten so bad

That we're ready for God to tear open the heavens,

We're ready for God to tear it all down,

To shake even the mountains,

For God's fire to kindle the brushwood of broken systems,

And unjust power structures,

To bring this murky water to a boil.

We worry that God's face is hidden from us,

That God has allowed us to wallow in our own iniquity.

We are willing to let our Potter shape us into something,

Into anything that looks more like Jesus, more like God's upside-down kingdom,

And we don't know, these days, just what will happen.

We don't know that everything in America will turn out just fine post-crisis

And even if Humpty Dumpty does get put back together again,

That means we're still a nation with a racism problem,

A nation with a poverty problem, a war problem, a gender problem,

And a colonialism problem.

The America before Trump was still an America founded on slavery,

And genocide against indigenous peoples.

Even before this last election, this country's leaders

Have been pushing themselves further away from conscience,

And further toward combat.

With power consolidated in the hands of two parties,

Each only trying to score the next point, get the next win,

With one side cynically scheming against the poor in favor of the rich,

Always ready to cast aside last year's lies for new ones,

And the other side constantly seeming to show up

With a knife to a gunfight.

And the voters begging them, please stop having gunfights!

Or even worse, lots of us sucked into the gunfights, into the taxfights,
Into every jib and jab, rooting for someone to get smacked down,
For our side to finally shut them up with the cleverest comeback

So we can post it on Facebook in vicarious glory!

This democracy, this Constitution is in trouble, folks.

And we don't know what this country will look like on the other side of 2020.

We may know that in a few weeks it will be Christmas,

But we don't know if our current calamities

Will be the catalyst for something amazing,

Or the tipping point toward terror.

And neither did our old buddies Asaph and Isaiah.

Unfortunately, they didn't get the kind of salvation

that you and I would celebrate.

Asaph's song laments the fall of Samaria, the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Isaiah speaks lament over the destruction of Judah and Zion that followed.

While Jewish rulers would later preside again over these regions,

It would only be as vassals, ruled from afar

By Persia, then Greece, then Rome, then Byzantium,

then the Ottomans, then the British.

The next time Asaph and Isaiah's people inhabited an independent state
on that same land....was 1948.

Now I'm not saying America is doomed to suffer a fate like Israel and Judah.

All I'm saying is that this Advent season
We have a better connection to these verses,
To their sense of uncertainty, of calamity.

We feel what those in the Old Testament felt who waited for,
Who longed for the Lord's Anointed, the Messiah.

The ugliness of our current troubles frees us from simplifying
From prettying things up, from taking refuge in metaphor,
In order to connect with these Scriptures.

And lets us deal with the world-changing potential, the spiritual electricity
Of God's love unleashed in human form. [pause]-

This year's Advent theme is Yes! Let it Be!

Preaching the first week of Advent, it's kind of my job to introduce this theme,
I'm not sure I'm going a great job connecting with it so far.

I'm sure this theme will match up nicely with the following Sundays' Scriptures,
But this week's verses seem to evoke the exact opposite of Let it Be.

Asaph and Isaiah are speaking from disaster and desolation.

They want God to come and save them, to shake things up!

They aren't trying to Let it Be!

But Nathan, you all should be thinking,

Advent is not about disaster and destruction!

You've covered the waiting and the longing,

But Advent is also about hope, and faith that things can change.

Things might not have worked out for Israel as a nation,

But surely that doesn't mean all this waiting is in vain!

I know, I know. You got me.

I promise you the hope part is in here eventually.

I don't know if it can counteract all the earthquakes and the bread of tears stuff,

But you gotta cut me some slack.

It IS only the First Sunday of Advent.

And I'm allowed to leave things a little uncertain and murky if I need to.

My road toward hope this week runs through the Gospel of Mark.

Now Mark 13, in the part before today's selection,

Is a speech by Jesus to the disciples, warning them of troubles to come

And exhorting them to keep awake, to watch out, to be alert.

Not exactly Let it Be, right?

I'm telling you the Advent theme is great,

But these verses just aren't having it.

But this passage does continue the trend of messages we can relate to

As we look for mystery and hope in an untidy Advent.

Now I mentioned before that this passage is often connected

To the fall of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 CE.

In fact, the connection to that historical event

Is why many scholars believe Mark was written around that time.

But while the destruction of the Second Temple does fit nicely

Into the pattern of the Old Testament passages,

I want to ignore that possibility and simply look at the context within Mark

For these verses.

That context is that we are getting near the end of Mark's Jesus story.

Literally the next chapter is the Last Supper.

Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem,

Jesus has just gotten done making a big public speech and taking questions.

Now he reacts to his disciples marveling at the tall buildings

By launching into a warning about dire events to come.

Now the big events Jesus talks about,

The abomination of desolation,

The darkening of the sun and moon,

The Son of Man coming in the clouds,

The secret day and hour.

You can get caught in a big old trap

Trying to pin down the timeline that Jesus is laying out.

You can say the day and hour or the coming of the Son of Man

Is the end times, Jesus' ascension to heaven,

Or a historical event that already happened.

I was caught down that rabbit hole myself for a while,

But then I noticed this odd juxtaposition of time statements

In verses 30 and 31

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away

Until all these things have taken place.

Heaven and earth will pass away,

but my words will never pass away.

Don't you find that odd?

If everything was going to happen before the disciples died out,

Who cares if the words pass away or not down the road?

Mission already accomplished, right?

What it honestly made me think of

Was a phrase from Battlestar Galactica, the sci-fi TV show.

They say, “All this has happened before,

All this will happen again.”

Not to make too much of that, really,

It just inspired me, gave me some hope.

Hope because if these words are both immediate and forever,

They can hold up to any point in history, even ours.

We are offered the same opportunity as the disciples,

An invitation to participate in what God is doing.

So let’s try to break down Jesus’ instructions on how to be alert.

In this passage, Jesus uses 4 different words related to seeing or looking.

βλεπετε

ιδητε

αγρυπνειτε

γρηγορη

Don’t worry, there’s not going to be a quiz on the Greek stuff.

βλεπετε comes from βλεπω, the general purpose NT word for see

But it also carries a connotation of the ability to see, not blind.

Like the guy who's healed who says "I was blind but now I βλέπω"

So instead we'll call βλέπετε "don't be blinded"

As in, keep your biases in check. Don't turn a blind eye to sin or need.

Don't let power or powerlessness keep you from seeing God in someone.

ιδητε comes from οραω, which is another general purpose seeing word,

But which can carry a connotation of remembering, bearing witness.

So let's make ιδητε "bear witness,"

This implies "don't be silent" when you see injustice,

Speak up for the voiceless, and be prepared to witness against yourself

When you are in the wrong.

Now αγρυπνειτε carries the specific connotation of not sleeping, staying awake.

I don't think Jesus is literally saying to NEVER sleep,

I see it here as don't let other things get in the way of your watchfulness.

Don't get sucked into the minutiae, the back and forth battles

Between Red and Blue,

Don't get sucked into your screen, whether frantically updating news headlines

Or scrolling forever, down and down your Facebook feed,

This sensory numbness, the overload where everything is important,

So nothing's important.

Don't do that. Don't sleep on God's activity in the world. *Αγρυπνεῖτε!*

And finally we have *γρηγορη*,

And yes this is where the name Gregory comes from.

Γρηγορη means "watch" in the sense of being circumspect,

Being vigilant, paying attention.

It's the command the master gives the slave in verse 34,

Translated as "keep awake,"

And it's repeated by Jesus as his final instruction of the passage

To his disciples and to us all.

It reminds me of an exhortation Herm Weaver gave

At an MSMC conference a few years back.

He said, "Pay attention to what you pay attention to."

That's always stuck with me, these days more than ever.

So let's shorten that to help remember,

And just say "pay attention."

So here are the instructions Jesus gives for participating in God's kingdom

During uncertain times:

Don't be blinded

Bear witness

Don't sleep

Pay attention

Keep these on your mind this advent season,

Like a secret invitation to find where God is moving,

To find places to get to work,

Even when our tidy narratives break down.

To keep looking out for the flow of the Spirit in the midst of disaster,

In the midst of waiting, longing for a Savior.

But Jesus' invitation is not to sit back and wait, to go to sleep,

To Let it Be, if you will,

But to pay attention and be ready for the next chance

To get your hands busy in the works of the Spirit.

They say faith without works is dead,

And hope without work is just a daydream.

In troubling times, we turn to God and to the Scripture,

To the words of those in times more troubled than our own,

We feel with them the pain, the longing, the hope

And heed our Lord's instructions to keep a lookout,

To stay awake for when God needs us.

We may not know the day or the hour when our wait is over,

When our Savior will arrive.

But that's ok with me.

We've got plenty of work to do before he comes.