

Sermon Notes December 3, 2023
Peace Lutheran Church
The Holy Gospel of Mark 13: 24-37
“Sharing the Hope!”

The first Sunday in Advent poses challenges for most who preach. Apocalyptic imagery tends to scare believers. I might shy away from talking about “the end of days.” This Lutheran pastor has even heard, more than once, that this kind of talk is for those in “other church circles” and not for us in mainline denominations.

Yet here we are. Year after year, we begin the Advent season with the urgent reminder to “beware, keep alert” (Mark 13: 33). Our African American siblings in Christ say, “Watch and pray!”

The teacher in Ecclesiastes says, “There is nothing new under the sun” (1: 9). The folks returning from Babylonian captivity were a diverse people who could not agree on how to worship God in a new age of freedom. They begged, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isa. 64: 1)!

Right here I could address the differences of opinions among good church folk, the importance of civil discourse and the beauty of diversity among God's children - saints and sinners alike.

Later, Jesus told his followers, “But in those days, after that suffering, 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”(Mark 13: 24-26). Here, I could share how it feels to wait as we endure suffering. The stark reality is that bad things happen to good people. What are we to make of this theological conundrum?

Later still, when the Corinthian church struggled to “be church” together, Paul wrote, “[God] will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1: 8-9). Here I might expound on what it means to be a “missional church.” How do we partner with Jesus? In what new ways might God be inviting our congregation into accompaniment with our neighbors as we learn to grow together?

There is both law and gospel to preach on this day. The law is glaring in all cases. We do not know how to love God and neighbor as ourselves. We do not know how to worship God in Spirit and in truth. We do not know how to be church together. We can be selfish with God's many gifts of time, talent, and treasure. As a result, we cry out in desperation, “Stir up your strength and come to help us. ...Restore us, O God of hosts, let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved” (Ps. 80: 2, 7).

Perhaps the reason we revisit apocalyptic literature on the first Sunday of Advent is to be reminded that, despite our sinfulness, God chose to wrap Himself in flesh and dwell among us. This is the gospel. The Christmas trees and carols are very nice. The

decorated cookies and gifts may seem even better. But best of all is the love of Emmanuel, God with us, whom we await now and in the age to come.

As we wait, it is the Holy Spirit who strengthens us to the end. It is God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who partners with us, teaching us how to be called, gathered, and sent into the neighborhood to bring tidings of great joy. It is God who makes us a people - the church - deployed for the sake of the whole world!

