

**Hope: Where Do We Look for it?**  
**Mark 13:24-37**  
**November 27, 2011**

At the beginning of chapter 13, the disciples are enamored by the scale and beauty of the Jerusalem temple and have a "Little Red Riding Hood" moment, exclaiming, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Not impressed Jesus begins to talk to them about its destruction that is coming fast toward them.

This of course is not what they wanted to hear. Nor is it what we want to hear. We want "Santa Claus is Coming to Town"; we don't want these words from our reading: *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 of the heavens will be shaken* (13:24-25).

What chance does our text have to engender hope in us, and what relevance to this Advent season? Amidst the chaos of this time of year, and especially this year in the midst of the worst pandemic in a hundred years, we hear a promise that transcends the social upheaval of our time. Our feelings have been frayed by the events of 2020 and hope has for many melted away. Perhaps, in spite of our restrictions we will welcome the season's greetings as a tonic for our general malaise. It is into this moment, for many a time of despair, that our word of the coming of the Messiah meets us. [SEP]

It's commonplace for us to be impressed by the symbols of power that we erect in our cities. On some of the television shows we watch there are often quite amazing panoramic shots of cities like London or New York or Paris. We never cease to be amazed by the modern scale of these growing cities. They tower above the ground, just as we also see in Toronto today. The last time I drove through downtown on the Gardiner I was amazed by the scale of growth; driving through the condo towers was like driving through a mountain canyon. These are powerful images that belie the reality that dwells deep within them; people who have experienced the widespread fear and loss of confidence that pervades the country. The hope that we have placed in science, in an ever-growing GNP, and in our ability to resolve our social issues, has withered of late. We keep being told that life is only

going to get better and better. This year has punctured these hopes. The medical and economic crisis has threatened to unhinge the whole system. The scenes of the **occupy protests** in all the major cities is a vivid reminder of the unrest and sense of outrage and hopelessness that stalks so many today. Yes, our sense of hope may be suffering a little as we enter this Advent season.

With the instability and volatility of global markets, the unsettling levels of unemployment, the political unease around the world, all this and a growing sense of marked social disruption, has left us unmoored and unsettled.

So where do you search for hope in this present climate? Recently in the U.S. we have witnessed an attempted coupe by one half of the citizens. They claim that the candidate who won the seven million more votes than his opponent did so through fraud and cheating. It will be harder this year on Black Friday, to have the bell-ringers outside stores, and advertisers to get their consumerism-as-therapy machine into high gear. And we Christians say to our neighbours and ourselves: **this is a good time to think about the world falling apart** It's a good time to take stock and see where we stand in the big God's story.

Jesus is telling his followers that the temple will no longer be the dwelling place of God. For the Jewish people the temple had been a symbol of stability and power for centuries. Why does the threat to the temple's demise shape Mark's theology? Jesus' answer, of course, is that everything is about to change dramatically, and this shift will be seen in the new locus of God's presence, not in the temple, but in the cross. Not in the city proper but outside the city walls. Not in the center of power and authority but in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark's primary theological question makes a good Advent question. Where will we look for God this Advent season? And on this first Sunday of Advent we seek answers in a most unlikely place, Jesus' apocalyptic discourse.

By this word, **apocalyptic**, we refer to a style of literature that is found in various writings developed during the period between the old and new Testaments. At the heart of apocalyptic literature is encouragement and hope. This literature, such as Daniel, is offered

as hope in times of crisis. Similarly, the book of Revelation was written to meet the sense of foreboding among the Christian communities at the end of the first century. Likewise, Mark's apocalyptic chapter is intended to give perspective and hope to the recipients of his gospel. They are feeling, perhaps not unlike many of us today, a little scared and threatened by situation they find themselves confronting.

The language of the sun being darkened, the moon shrouded and dark, the stars falling out of the sky, and the powers of heaven shaken, is typical of apocalyptic language. It is used to uncover something that has been hidden by using emotional, vivid, exaggerated pictures. So, when present trials make the future dark and uninviting (the temple is destroyed and Rome seems unstoppable) Mark sends them Jesus' words about a future as yet hidden from view. So, when Jesus talks about the destruction of the temple this is terrifying, confusing language for the disciples. But he is telling them in this discourse that out of this turmoil God will reveal an entirely new way forward. For, as they will shortly learn, out of the suffering and death of their Messiah will be new life.

So, in your private doubts about the future, in this world with so much seemingly in turmoil, in a world where consumerism, inequity, and the growing gulf between rich and poor defines our new reality, Jesus says that with his coming at the end of the age all this will be reversed. When Jesus comes back the stars, which in common first century cosmology represented the political rulers, will fall. And the real ruler of the world will return, not with more destruction, but with hope. The power dynamics are changing—indeed, have already changed. With his life, death and resurrection the world has altered course, one from inevitable destruction to one of harmony, renewal and a hope-filled future for the human family and creation.

But this apocalyptic chapter also points us to the cross. The darkening of the sun, the dimming of the moon's light, and the stars falling from heaven points to the cross. Mark, I think, intentionally depicts Jesus as declaring that his return occurs precisely at the moment when he is nailed to the cross and our breath is taken away as we see God's love poured out for us and all the world. It's message cuts through any sentimentality and romanticism about

Christmas and reminds us that incarnation is risky business. From this perspective Mark is inviting us to imagine that *whenever* Jesus may come again all of our anticipation and preparation of Jesus' second advent should be shaped by his first advent in the form of a vulnerable infant and as a man hanging on a tree. More than that, I think Mark is inviting us to look for Jesus now in similar places of vulnerability, openness, and need.

Advent therefore, speaks to us of the amazing truth that death will be no more because God will die. Advent points beyond itself to the wider story of God's kingdom coming into the world. It moves us from incarnation to Easter. Indeed, Advent and Christmas are hopelessly sentimental seasons without the broader vision of Easter, of death and resurrection.

This is not to be a downer just when Bing really kicks into high gear with "White Christmas." It's to speak the truth, about our hope and our future. The incredible event, for which we wait, of course, is our God who has chosen to enter into all that decays, into all that will die, and to radically transform that inevitability into something quite different. Advent gives us the time and space once again to believe in and live out this reality of God's coming into the world in Jesus.

That which bookmarks this discourse in Mark 13 is the warning not to look for hope in all the wrong places. All sorts of false prophets will come along, Jesus warns, and will lead people astray. The message to them and to us is to be alert. If Advent teaches us anything it is that we are people who are watching and alert, whose lives are rooted in this promise of Christ's coming again.

So, we are to be alert, watching, bringing to bear on our current confusion and discouragement, the hope that Christ's coming promises. Don't get sidetracked; don't get bogged down in the whining, in the profound disillusionment of our day, in the escapism of our culture, for Advent reminds us of a different story, one of victory and hope for today and for tomorrow.

***Amen***

