

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 3, 2023 – The First Sunday of Advent
Mark 13:24-37
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today we begin the season of Advent, a time of preparation for our yearly remembrance of the birth of Jesus. Before I speak about Advent, I think it is important to consider an aspect of our lesson from the Gospel of Mark which you may find troubling, and which has vexed Christians for many centuries.

In this passage Jesus is speaking about the end times, when the Son of Man will return in power and glory. There will be signs in nature that the end is near: “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven.” Just as when the fig tree puts forth its leaves, people know that summer is near, so when these signs appear, people will know that the end is near. Then Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” The troubling question is this: was Jesus wrong? And the answer is both “yes” and “no.” Clearly the end of time and the final coming of the kingdom of God did not occur during Jesus’ generation. Jesus was wrong about the timing of the end.

This highlights an important theological point related to the birth of Jesus which we are preparing to celebrate. This is the mystery of the Incarnation: God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. As St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Philippi (Philippians 2:5-8): “Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, ... being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” In Jesus God willingly accepted the limitations of human life, even death. Jesus was limited in many of the ways all human beings are limited, including having limited knowledge and a perspective shaped in part by the particulars of his time and place on earth.

On the other hand, as Christians we assert with full faith that in terms of the “big picture” of human life and God’s interaction with human beings and all God’s creation, in terms of general principles, Jesus was not wrong. In today’s passage from Mark Jesus speaks of the end of the world as we know it, which is a world full of suffering. The message here is “good news”: at the end, God will come with power and glory. Everything will be set right forever. Light will overcome darkness. Life will overcome death. Love will overcome hatred. Mercy, peace, and righteousness will finally have their endless day. All because God will come with the salvation only God can bring. This is the “big picture” that Jesus taught and that we believe is true. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ratifies this truth, a sign of salvation.

If you are interested in reading something special this Advent, you might consider this book, “Advent with Evelyn Underhill.” I have mentioned Evelyn Underhill before. She was a 20th century English author who wrote significant and well-respected books about spirituality and theology. This little book is a selection from her writings, with a short passage for every day of Advent and the Christmas season, up to Epiphany.

One of her most profound meditations concerns “Evil and Reality.” We have all been very troubled by recent and ongoing events in the world, from Lewiston to the Holy Land. I’m sure many of us have been struggling with the question of how we can make sense of the

tremendous evil in the world in light of the promises of the Gospel. This is anything but a new problem for people of faith! Theologians call it “the problem of evil.”

Underhill writes this: “Christian spirituality does not explain evil and suffering, which remain a mystery beyond the reach of the human mind ... It insists that something has gone wrong, and badly wrong, with the world. That world as we know it does not look like the work of the loving Father whom the Gospels call us to worship; but rather, like the work of selfish and undisciplined children who have been given wonderful material and a measure of freedom, and not used that freedom well. Yet we see in this muddled world a constant struggle for Truth, Goodness, Perfection; and all those who give themselves to that struggle – the struggle for the redemption of the world from greed, cruelty, injustice, selfish desire and their results – find themselves supported and reinforced by a spiritual power which enhances life, strengthens will, and purifies character. And they come to recognize more and more in that power the action of God. These facts are as real as the other facts, which distress and puzzle us; the apparent cruelty, injustice and futility of life. We have to account somehow for the existence of gentleness, purity, self-sacrifice, holiness, love” (pages 29-30). When theologians discuss “the problem of evil,” they also need to deal with “the problem of good” – such good qualities as Underhill lists that are also part of human reality.

Advent is a season of preparation, a time of waiting. What are we preparing for? What are we waiting for? You may think that “Christmas” is the obvious answer. That isn’t a “wrong” answer, but I would suggest there is a much better answer, and today’s lesson from the Gospel of Mark points to that answer. We are waiting for the coming of Christ. Not the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. That is in the past. At Christmas we remember that past event because of its astounding meaning. But we can’t really wait for something that has already happened. We wait, with hope, for something that will happen in the future – the coming of Christ, a new heaven and a new earth. And while we wait, Jesus instructs us to “keep awake,” to do the work that has been entrusted to us by God, and to be on the lookout for God. I think that means joining the struggle for the redemption of the world that Evelyn Underhill speaks of.

During the next three weeks we will all be preparing for Christmas. I ask you to think about what you will do and how you will spend your resources of time and energy, of talent and treasure as you prepare for our celebration of the birth of Jesus. And I ask you to think about how what you do to prepare for Christmas relates to preparing for the coming of Christ and the kingdom of God.

This Advent I would urge all of us to think deeply about our faith. Our Christian story begins with the light of the infant Christ shining brightly in a dark world, and it ends with the glorious light of the risen Christ, the light that overcame the darkness of the cross. Our story is a deep, profound story. We are part of the story, for by God’s grace we have been called to be Christ’s body in a dark and broken world. Filled with hope founded on the abiding love of God, may each of us this season BE the light in today’s darkness and pass on to someone else the hope we have been given, the hope we have that God’s love will triumph over all. In Jesus’ name. Amen.