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Mark 13:24-37

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“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.”

It had not been an easy time for the community that Mark wrote to. A famine had decimated Palestine. The sky had been darkened by the ash of the fires that nearly destroyed Rome and by the groanings of Mount Vesuvius. The earth had shaken from tremors and quakes which destroyed Lodicia. Rome's armies were faltering – at the hands of a Judean revolt and soon at the hands of a Parthian invasion. Civil war had engulfed the empire; the year with four emperors would not soon be forgotten. The center of Jewish life, Jerusalem, and faith, the Holy Temple, had been destroyed. The Christian community had been blamed for Rome's problems, for the fires, and for the tumult in Jerusalem.

The world was falling apart. Their brothers and sisters were imprisoned. They were seeking answers. They were seeking hope.

This passage is often called the “mini-apocalypse.”

Now, I want to be clear that apocalyptic literature. It is not about predicting the end times or the destruction of the world. Instead, it is born out of crisis, out of feeling that the world is ending. It tries to make sense out of the pain and suffering of current events. It seeks to cast them into a larger, cosmic framework, and in doing so to give comfort to those people who are currently suffering or being oppressed. It is literature of hope.

“Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”

These were the words that Mark's community needed desperately to hear. Jesus was coming. Jesus IS coming. Not in destruction, but when the world feels decimated. When the brokenness feels unbearable and every day is a struggle. When the weight of

the world sits upon their shoulders and they cry out for God, like the prophet Isaiah: “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!”

As we begin this season of Advent, the four weeks preceding Christmas, we enter a season of waiting. Waiting in between what no longer is and what is yet to come. Waiting for the unveiling of God’s love in the birth of a child. It is a season, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside.”

Mark’s audience, and all of us, as we enter Advent, are in a liminal space. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin word for “threshold,” and liminal space refers to an in-between or transitional condition in which one is “neither here nor there,” or, sometimes, both here and there. It acknowledges the space between no longer and not yet.

2020 may be the queen of liminal years. Caught between the reality of a virus, a pandemic that has forever altered our lives, leaving us hurting and bereft of those we love. We also are waiting, yearning, for the arrival of a vaccine. Longing for the cases to decline, for our communities to be healthy again. Waiting for a cure, and an end to what has been and still is.

Liminal time is a time fraught with anxiety, frustration, and confusion. It is a time when things are happening *to* you, and you have no agency, no power of your own. It is a time when “freedom has to be opened from the outside.” It implies that the things which need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort. In many ways, it feels agonizingly helpless.

And so we yearn for God to intervene in the world. We want a hero, a savior, or maybe even a politician, to rescue us. We want out. We want to be on the other side, to see clearly, and to find peace.

When? When will this happen? We want to know. When will the vaccine be delivered? When will we be able to gather? When will the fires in the west cease, the storms quit raging? When will it end?

Watch, Mark tells us. Watch in the evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn. Wait in the liminal space a little longer. These same times that will soon mark the gathering with his disciples at evening, his betrayal and arrest at midnight, Peter’s denial at cockcrow, and Jesus’ sentence to death at dawn. Watch. Wait. It is no longer and is not yet.

Watch because God's unveiling, the hope that breaks through, is coming on the cross. It comes not in the end of the world, but in the hidden and the unexpected. Politicians and religious authorities mocked it. The crowd, gathered for a spectacle, dismissed it. Even his disciples, bumbling and fumbling as they were, missed it. Yet in that vulnerable, oh so human, small and broken figure of Jesus on the cross, God was at work.

Like the rending of the temple fabric, and the heavens at Jesus' baptism, God is tearing to pieces all that would keep us from God, closing the gap between what we deserve and what God wants to give us, promising to be with us and for us in and through all things. God is in the liminal space. God is present here and now, in the past and in what is to come.

As we look toward Christmas, we remember God's promise. That God came as a small and vulnerable baby, born in an unexpected place to poor and frightened parents. Born in a world that was fraught with anxiety and fear, occupied governments, and unknown tomorrows. God came when hope felt distant, when the weight deadened on their shoulders and they stumbled.

God continues to come to us in small, vulnerable, unexpected, and unlooked for ways even now. Even in 2020, the year that doesn't give up, God continues to come. As my professor David Lose writes, "each time we reach out to another in love, God is once again invading the kingdoms and structures of this world with God's radical and transformative presence and grace."

Love has the power to unlock the door from the outside. It has the ability to reveal God's presence and redemption, to unveil hope.

Waiting in silence is not the purpose of Advent. Waiting for a rescuer, a miracle, is not the purpose of Advent. No. Advent calls on us to watch. To watch for the ways that God's love is being revealed. To watch for God's transformative presence. To watch for grace. To watch for the ways that the doors are being opened.

And to watch is also active. Not just as a witness, but to bear the revelation ourselves.

"Do small things with great love." That's how Mother Theresa said it. Small things.

What small things can you do in love that reveal God's presence and redemption? Is it a card, a call, some flowers or cookies? Is it a Zoom date with a family member you haven't spoken to in too long, or maybe a distanced walk with a fellow worshiper you haven't seen in 8 long months?

What are the small gestures that can show your trust that God is with us and for us? What decorations are set up in your home that remind you of this trust? What prayers are on your heart? What carols and hymns hold you in song?

And also, what are the small sacrifices you might make that provide opportunities to see God still at work loving and blessing God's people and world? Maybe you've already made them- a smaller thanksgiving gathering, a tiny wedding, wearing a mask, trimming down the trips to the grocery store. Maybe it's supporting the local businesses as they struggle through yet another round of anxiety.

In small ways God's love is unveiled by each of us. We honor the space between no longer and not yet. We wait and we watch. With down and out shepherds, strangers who don't speak our language, and first-time parents, afraid for themselves and for their coming child. We wait, because Emmanuel is coming, God is with us. We act because whenever and wherever we act in love, God is present.

Amen.