

# Advent Anticipation

---

## **Mark 13:24-37**

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. 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.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 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 not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Many things drew me to the Episcopal Church when I was a graduate student three decades ago: the liturgy, the incomparable music, the historical connectedness to the Church in ages past, the emphasis on the Eucharist. The church building itself, not unlike this one, suggested that something important transpired there.

But no factor arguably was more important to me than the church calendar. In the evangelicalism of my childhood, each Sunday was, at least ostensibly, an observance of Easter Sunday. There's nothing wrong with that, I suppose; Easter and the resurrection of our Lord are undeniably at the center of our faith. But treating every Sunday as Easter Sunday has the effect of flattening out the church year.

And I suspect that if you mentioned why it was that the Church worshiped on Sunday rather than the Jewish Sabbath – namely to accommodate the Emperor Constantine's continuing fondness for the Sun God, even after his conversion to Christianity in A.D. 312 – I expect that information would be met with a blank and disbelieving stare.

The liturgical calendar invites us into the life of Jesus – to anticipate his Advent, to stand next to him as he squares off against the Scribes and the Pharisees, to walk with him along the Sea of Galilee, to watch as he heals the sick and makes the lame to walk, and finally to follow him up that agonizing climb to Golgotha. In so doing we relive his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection every calendar year.

Today, of course, marks the first Sunday of Advent, and this morning's Gospel reading speaks about “the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.” We are reminded to be watchful for the coming of the Lord.

And yet a swirl of contradictions surround this season of Advent, especially as commercial and consumer demands compete for our attention. More and more we observe the birth of a child to poor, homeless parents in Bethlehem

with great, orgiastic demonstrations of ostentation and excess. Last Friday, a scrum broke out at the Wal-Mart in Pine Bluffs, Arkansas, over waffle irons. A woman in Los Angeles unleashed a fusillade of pepper spray against her fellow shoppers lest they impede her access to some kind of computer game console. Christmas shoppers at the Wal-Mart in Valley Stream, New York, stampeded the doors at 4:55 a.m. on Friday morning a couple of years ago – known as “Black Friday,” the day after Thanksgiving – and killed a store employee. “When they were saying they had to leave, that an employee got killed, people were yelling, ‘I’ve been on line since yesterday morning,’ one of the shoppers told the Associated Press. “They kept shopping.”

Deck the halls.

Parties and shopping and “Silver Bells” threaten to overwhelm the simple profundity of what happened in the stable of Bethlehem. But amid the frenzy of the Christmas season, today’s Gospel offers a promise that transcends the cultural focus of our time: “Heaven and earth will pass away,” Jesus says, “but my words will not pass away.”

Think of the flurry of words that attend this season: “Merry Christmas,” “Happy Holidays,” “Thank you for shopping at Wal-Mart,” “Cash or charge?” “Santa Claus is coming to town,” “Would you like that gift-wrapped?” “Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer,” “How about a gift card?” Self-anointed traditionalists seek to push back with their own words: “Jesus is the Reason for the Season” or “We Say ‘Merry Christmas.’”

Perhaps the true miracle of Advent, the coming of the Christ, is that his words can be heard at all above the din of what passes for the celebration of his birth. But today’s reading reminds us of the durability of the gospel, the embodiment of “good news” that we encounter in Bethlehem’s stable – but also throughout the year in his Sermon on the Mount, his compassion toward those he called “the least of these,” and finally through his passion and resurrection.

These are the words that will not pass away, for Jesus himself, as St. John reminds us, is the word made flesh, light in the darkness of winter and in our own unaccustomed economic stringency. Perhaps these circumstances will help us listen better this year to the words of Jesus. “I am the light of the world,” he says, not the light emanating from the shopping malls and the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. “I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly” – not life in the abundance of goods but in the abundance of life itself.

**A**s we enter this blessed season of Advent, let us listen for the words of Jesus beyond the clanging of what passes for Christmas these days, above the clatter of commercials and the ka-ching of cash registers. “Heaven and earth will pass away,” Jesus reminds us, “but my words will not pass away.” The new do-dad will break or rust someday; that fur coat will end up at the church bazaar. But Jesus invites us to store up treasures in heaven where moth and rust cannot destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. “For where your treasure is,” Jesus says, “there will your heart be also.”

This year – and perhaps especially in this year of straightened circumstances and diminished expectations – let us listen for the words of Jesus above the din of commerce. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

I can't think of a better way to observe Advent, the coming of our Lord.

First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut