

**The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
First Sunday of Advent**

**Year B
RCL**



Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

The Collect

The Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

AMEN

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence--

as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil--

to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,

no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.

We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.

We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;

for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said, “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.”

SERMON

It's the first Sunday in Advent, which means we have completed another liturgical year together. As we move into the new liturgical year, we switch our focus from the Gospel of Matthew, which we followed last year, to the Gospel of Mark. Let's see what new perspectives we can find on the Story the church exists to tell.

You'd think that as we move into a new Gospel, we'd start at the beginning, but you would be wrong. Today's passage comes from near the end of Mark's Gospel, a portion of Mark known as the "Olivet Discourses" or the "Little Apocalypse" and deals with the ever-fascinating question, "When will the end be?" If you want to find something that will generate an endless argument, bring up this question, get some popcorn, sit back and enjoy the show.

The thing that most amuses me about the degree of certainty some people express about this question is that Jesus himself didn't answer it. Indeed, Jesus confessed that he did not know. Instead, he told his Disciples to keep awake because the time of the coming of the Lord was still an upcoming event. No one, not even the angels or the Son, He told them, knows that time.

That bothers some people. For me, I'm grateful that no one knows the day or the time. If we did, we'd wait til the last moment to undertake the work we were placed here to do. You know how we are. We put stuff off. According to Eusebius, Emperor Constantine was marching with his army when he looked up to the sun and saw a cross of light above it and the Greek words "by this, be victorious!", often translated into Latin as "In hoc signo vinces". Eusebius tells us that Constantine did not understand what he had seen until Jesus appeared to him in a dream and explained that he should use the Greek letters Chi Rho, the first two letters of the Greek word "Christos" as a sign against his enemies. He won the battle of Milvian Bridge, and the following year he and his co-regent issued the Edict of Milan establishing religious tolerance throughout the Empire, reversing the persecutions of Christians under his predecessor, Diocle-

tian. Constantine is remembered as the first Christian Emperor of Rome, and honored as St. Constantine in the Eastern Church.

HOWEVER...he put off his own baptism until he was on his death bed. The church puts as good a spin on that as they can, speculating that he wanted to be absolved of as much sin as possible by waiting until he was finished committing them before he underwent baptism. Living the life of the Gospel puts a crimp in a lot of things one might wish to do as Emperor. I think Constantine thought that putting off baptism until the last moment might be a way to have his cake and eat it, too.

Or maybe we're like the guy that decided he could fly by gluing wings on his arms, jumping off a tall building, and flapping really hard. As he plummeted past the 8th floor, flapping for all he was worth, a guy watching from a window in the building asked him, "How's it going?"

"So far, so good", he replied. Well....yes, but there will soon be an accounting. That much is certain. The time of that accounting is known only to the Father. Not knowing when the end will come **should** encourage us to greater efforts to live the life that Jesus laid out for us.

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.

Unfortunately, for many people I talk to, the thought that the time of the second coming is still to be announced doesn't seem to focus their attention on what they are doing now, as Jesus is saying, but rather focuses them on endless speculation of what will happen then. I'm concerned by the contemporary interest in end-times because I think it is a distraction from what we should be thinking about, which is how we live our lives now in God's creation. Jesus is clear here – what we do with our time on earth matters. He uses a very precise simile:

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.

This isn't a “throw away” world in which, if you are smart, you do something to get yourself saved then just wait for the end so you can say, “I told you so”. We have work here, church, and it matters how we do that work. As interesting as it is to hold forth on how the world is going to come to an end in 2025 at 3:00 in the afternoon, on a Tuesday, debates like that are really a way to stop thinking about the hard work we need to do today. It's also a pointless exercise. Jesus says plainly:

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Even for Jesus, it's an upcoming event. If we want to be faithful servants, we have to turn from speculations about things we cannot know, to our actions here in God's creation. This is where things get really tough, and I won't pretend they don't. More than five hundred years before Jesus spoke, a prophet scholars call “Third Isaiah” spoke the word of God to a shattered group who had returned to Jerusalem after their long exile in Babylon. One of the things that he said has echoed through time:

Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

“We are the clay and you are our potter.” We would prefer to think of ourselves as masters of our own souls, captains of our own ships. In that way, whatever we accomplish grants us bragging rights. We do NOT like to think of ourselves as raw material in the hands of a potter, yet those are Isaiah's words. We are formed and sustained every moment by God's hands.

We are the clay, and God is our potter. It is from God that we spring and to God that we return. In between those two events, it is God's prerogative to mold us, as a potter molds clay. Of course, just as the clay has no way to envision the pot until it is formed as one, we have the greatest difficulty envisioning what God would make of us. From

the clay's perspective, the final form of the pot is still an upcoming event. From our perspective, the work God has for us is no easier to perceive. The work we have to do while awaiting the return of the Son of Man, is to learn to become attentive to the Word of God, and to be courageous enough to follow it as we become aware of it.

So...how does the clay that we are become aware of the pot God wishes to make of us? Doing the work of the Master takes faith and focus. Faith, because we must acknowledge that the potter has a plan for each of the elect. We are tempted to think that God is preoccupied by bigger things than little old us, but He is not. Believing that requires an act of faith.

The second piece is focus. We have to pay attention to the potter's hands. Here's a little personal story. Some time ago I had a bit of a crisis. On the one hand I knew very well how little I knew about being a pastor. I have no training to speak of. What business did I have standing before you jumped up in a fancy robe? I was swamped by the reality of how little I had to offer. Leaving the Chapel of St. Arbuck's one morning my eye fell upon two pennies lying one atop the other on the parking lot. Couldn't take my eyes off them. There they were – my two cents worth. Then I thought "You were called precisely because of your two cents worth. You answered and they are enough."

I picked up the pennies and they are framed on my desk to this day.

Focus! Did someone say something today that was meaningful to you? Did you see something today that brought the love of God out of the shadows for you? That's the hands of the potter you saw. Did you become aware of someone else's needs, and decide to fulfill them, maybe without even letting them know? You are molded by the hands of the potter. God is the ground of being, the sustainer of each of us. He is the potter; we are the clay.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

One more personal story before we part. I get the text of the sermon from the Revised Common Lectionary on Monday. By Tuesday, I usually have something in mind for the sermon. This week – nothing. Nada. That happens sometimes and when it does, I go into my archives for a past sermon for this Sunday. That’s what I did, and I found a sermon titled “To Be Announced” about the second coming of Christ. I copied it and renamed it “Coming Event” (so you wouldn’t know you were getting a reread).

I thought I should edit it a little and started in. A word here, a sentence there, pretty soon, I realized that I had quite a few edits. Even after the bulletin was printed with “Coming Event” as the sermon title, I edited away. What emerged was this week’s sermon, “Faith and Focus”. I’m convinced that was the hand of the potter, leading me out of my difficulty. Until we meet again...

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright 2017 J. Stewart Schneider