

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
First Sunday of Advent

Year B
RCL



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

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.

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.

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 Page 702, BCP

Qui regis Israel

- Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.
- 2 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.
- 3 Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
- 4 O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
- 6 You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.
- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
- 16 Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand,
the son of man you have made so strong for yourself.
- 17 And so will we never turn away from you;
give us life, that we may call upon your Name.
- 18 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Mark 13:24-37

Jesus said to his disciples, “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. The two Gospels have a different approach to telling the story of Jesus, and we are so blessed to have such a richness of accounts. So, let's move into this new territory and see what new perspectives on the Story the church exists to tell we can find.

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 "to be announced". No one, not even the angels or the Son, knows that time. That sounds like good advice to me. If we were to replace the airbag in the steering wheel with a spear point aimed at the center of the driver's chest, people would drive differently. If we were all to live our lives, every minute, in the expectation that God would return to His Creation in the next minute, people would live differently.

Well, Jesus hasn't gotten here in the past 2,000 years, so we generally take the approach of the guy that decid-

ed 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.

Or, maybe we're like the people who rebuild their houses on barrier islands or in wildfire areas after the hurricane or the wildfire destroys their earlier home, saying to themselves that it couldn't possibly happen again, and anyway, the view is so nice. That's pretty much our approach to the second coming of Jesus. But what if He came in the next minute?

For an example of our preference to put off confession to the last moment, we need look only to the Emperor Constantine. As the story goes, he saw the Greek letters

Chi Rho, being the first two letters of the Greek word “Christos”, in the sky before the Battle of Milvian Bridge against Maxentius in the year 312. According to Eusebius, Constantine was marching with his army, when he looked up to the sun and saw a cross of light above it, and with it 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 letters Chi Rho 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, thus reversing the persecutions of Christians under his predecessor, Diocletian. Constantine is remembered as the first Christian Emperor of Rome, and honored as St. Constantine in the East-

ern 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 your cake and eat it, too.

That same human need not to change things until the last minute is behind the need to know when Jesus will come again. Not knowing when the end will come **should** encourage us to greater efforts to live the life that Jesus laid out for us. Jesus said,

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 “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.

“Left Behind” series, I'm looking at you. The Olivet Discourses in Mark 13, and the parallel passages in Matthew 24 and 25, and Luke 21 have been the starting point for endless speculation on when the end will come, how we'll know it's coming, and what will happen then.

I'm concerned by the contemporary interest in end-times, what scholars call “eschatology”, 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 2015 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, by thinking instead about something that will happen, or not, in the future, which is much easier.

Of course, that's a terrible arrogance, and when we

take it out and look at it, we can see that. 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 "to be announced", so those who will tell you they know about the end times think that they are smarter than Jesus. If we want to be faithful servants, we have to turn from speculations about things we can not know about 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 some scholars call "Trito-Isaiah" or "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

down the ages to us:

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.

A scientist announced to God that he could create life.

“Fascinating”, said God. “Let’s see you do it.”

The scientist scooped up a handful of dirt and poured it into his equipment. God immediately stopped him.

“If you’re going to create life, start with your own dirt”, God said.

God is not just another clever chemist whose ways can be puzzled out in the laboratory. God is the ground of being, the sustainer of each of us. We are the clay, and God, our Father, is our potter. God is our Father, our Creator, our Beginner, the foundation of the dirt from which we are formed. 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 to be announced. 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. That's no easy thing. It's no wonder people would rather spend time arguing whether the preterists or the postmillennial dispensationalists have the clearer view of eschatology.

So...how does the clay that we are become aware of the pot God wishes to make of us? It takes faith and discipline, but it is available to each of us. Faith, because we first must believe that the potter does have a plan for each of us. Every one of us, the good, the bad and the ugly. That takes faith because we are tempted to think that God is preoccupied by bigger things than little old us, but He is not. His attention, His love is focused right on you, little old you. Trusting that the love of God is for the good of His creation, requires an act of faith. Sometimes, as in the stories of the martyrs, that requires enormous faith.

The second piece is discipline. We have to pay atten-

tion to the potter's hands. Did someone say something today that was meaningful to you? That's the hands of the potter. 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 need, and decide to fulfill them, maybe without even letting them know? You have become the hands of the potter.

The form that God has in mind for each of you is known only to God. For the rest of us, it's to be announced. I can't wait to see how you turn out.

AMEN

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

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