

Isaiah 64:1-9 ~ Mark 13:24-37

Those Who Dream: Obligated to Hope

First Sunday of Advent ~ November 29, 2020 ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion

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Introduction

We've jumped over to Mark, chapter 13. This gospel text may remind you of our Matthew 25 series because it is Mark's "Little Apocalypse." Good thing we're all trained up and ready to go after completing our three-week "Apocalyptic Training." Keeping it real and revelatory now on our First Sunday of Advent in our new Lectionary Year B, the year of Mark. So best settle in, Mark will take us, starting today into the months and year ahead. Dare I say, all the way to when we worshipping together again in this sanctuary? One can hope. Actually, as Christ followers, we are "*obligated to hope.*" More on that in a bit.

Right now, we can be grateful that we have Mark, our most down to earth, most raw and unfiltered, cut-to-the chase gospel to carry us through this stage of the pandemic. Mark is all about ordinary people dealing with the block and tackle of everyday life. He is more about the earthly than the cosmic, more about the present than the future, even in this chapter. You might call Mark our Zoom gospel: One of his favorite words is "immediately," weighing in with fewer words by far, than Matthew, Luke or John. He also packs the most irony and suspense in his 16 compact chapters. Mark is never muted, and keeps his video on to full effect. Let's listen and watch the images this text paints for us, as I read Mark 13:24-37.

Communion Meditation

"Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat, please put a penny in the old man's hat" ... "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel" ... "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town" ... "Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand." So, which is it? Who or what is coming? Christmas? Santa Claus, Christ? Every year, and maybe especially this year, many ask, "why do we have to sing all these gloomy songs in church when what we need are cheery Christmas carols, like" Joy to the World", or "Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" And why these two dark, haunting scriptures from Isaiah and Mark to kick off our Advent season? Could they have found something *more* depressing? What a buzz kill.

Yes, these readings are backlit by the night. A lament in Isaiah and a warning from Jesus. The prophet of Third Isaiah, wrote this lament after they had returned to Judah, back from the Babylonian exile: and *still* things are not right. Life is hard, the Temple has not been rebuilt. Isaiah lamented: we have all become like filthy rags and fade like leaves, for you have hidden your face from us. Oh my, that's dark. Then in Mark you did hear Jesus' dire predictions about the sun darkening, stars falling from heaven, and somber warnings, "Beware! Watch out! Keep awake! These are Jesus' last words of instruction to his disciples in Mark. His next teaching would be around a Table in the upper room, breaking bread, sharing the cup. He was giving them his gift of hope in the breaking of the bread, so they could find hope in the absolute darkness just ahead on the cross at Golgotha. The dark and lonesome valley loomed just ahead.

So why these passages today to kickstart Advent? Surely, we'd rather hear "Fear not, for behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people!" That is the Christmas story, isn't it? Who needs advent anyway? What we need is a little Christmas. Especially *this* year, Advent 2020, *Now* we are supposed to begin a season of waiting? It seems like all we've been doing is waiting and waiting for months. Waiting for a vaccine, waiting for the day it will become safe to open our sanctuary for worship again; waiting for election results to be certified and the election season to be finally over; waiting for when we can visit our families and loved ones and travel safely again, waiting for school and sports and music to happen like normal. Waiting for Congress to pass something, anything--that could help us get through this dark tunnel of unemployment and economic strain. In this prolonged, protracted year of waiting, and waiting, who needs advent? We've had too much of waiting. Can't we open our presents now?

"But about that day or hour, no one knows...Beware, keep alert... for you do not know when the time will come." (Mark 13:32-33) Jesus' warning to his disciples to keep awake because we don't really know the when of anything: This *also* hits *too close* to home this week for our FPC community. Only a week ago, Saturday, Brian Pickett, Jackie Pickett's husband, went deer hunting with family members and never came home. His heart stopped and never restarted. Healthy, vital, wonderful Brian. No one had an inkling that Saturday would be his last day on this earth. The utterly precious, fleeting gift of life and breath became achingly up close and present at Brian's heart-breaking death. None of us knows how long we have to live. Or when Jesus will come again. But we do know that Jesus was born here and that he will come again.

How much waiting; how much loss can we take? If you are starting to lose hope, or feel like the thing with feathers no longer perches in your soul; If you are losing hope about your own personal situation; or for someone you love; or if you are losing hope for our politically divided country to begin to function as a working democracy again. Or if you are losing hope remembering those who can't jog, play, drive, sleep, or breathe simply because they were doing these things while being Black in this country. Or if you are losing hope for the 2.75 million stranded migrants, who this very day are trying to get home, a home they were forced to flee from to save their lives, but since the coronavirus spread to where they were working in their adopted countries, they were forced to try to return: family upon struggling family of Venezuelans, Afghans, Ethiopians, Nicaraguans, Ukrainians; If you are starting to lose hope for *any* reason, and they are legion--then you really do need Advent.

Advent begins in the dark, as our two scriptures do. But that is not where it ends. Let us drink in the gospel truth of the prophetic preaching of Bishop Yvette A. Flunder, the founder of the City of Refuge United Church of Christ Church in San Francisco. She preaches to her primarily African American community; words white people also need to hear. Again and again she proclaims: "*We are obligated to hope.*" As people of faith, we are obligated to hope. Especially when we are in the dark where the way forward is not clear. Especially when what we are doing is not working. Why? As The Rev. Dr. Valerie Bridgeman explains, "Because hope is not dependent upon individual acts of justice, but rather the belief that the One who stands among us intends justice, and in the end, at the culmination of all things, justice will prevail, even if we must endure contractions of justice along the way."ⁱ

Advent hope, the hope to which we are obligated: is *not* generic. Advent Hope is specific and it's a call to action. This week, when you drive by and see the beautiful new blue banner outside our church that says "Advent Hope" let it serve as a reminder for you that our Advent Hope is the hope of Christ and it is calling your name. Hope is birthed in the dark, in our dreams. The blue of our Advent banners reminds us that hope grows in the dark. If your mood these days matches the long dark hours of the season we are in right now, open your eyes and look for the stars that Christ is giving you to point the way. As Jan Richardson in her Advent book titled, *Night Vision*, "I believe that Christ came not to dispel the darkness but to teach us to dwell with integrity, compassion and love in the midst of ambiguity. Darkness is not evil of itself—rather it can become the tending place in which our longings for healing, justice, and peace grow and come to birth."ⁱⁱ

How good is your night vision? When I was a Girl Scout, living in Wichita, Kansas I went on a camping trip with my troop to the mountains in Colorado, exciting enough living in the flatland, even without the amazing, mystical night hike we had. It was a hike like no other I have ever been on in my 60+ years of hiking mountain trails. We started the hike at the bottom of a mountain at midnight, and took a six hour hike all night, with the goal of reaching the summit by dawn. We had flashlights in our backpacks, but only for emergencies. We were taught that our night vision would give us far greater range and depth, than the small beam a flashlight would provide. The moonlight helped us as we began. At first it was crazy dark, but slowly our eyes adjusted to where we could see all we needed to, as we made our way up this winding ascent, step by step. I think we took too many breaks and ate all our snacks too soon, because the sun actually rose before, we got to the top. There's another sermon I could preach on that perhaps.

But today, the Table awaits us. Today, let it be the Advent Table of Hope birthed in Jesus' love that took him to the cross and back for each of us. Keep awake, says Jesus, use your night vision, and let me lead you forward through the night. I will close with seems to me like a night vision prayer written by Thomas Merton, *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and that fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Valerie Bridgeman, "Obligated to Hope: An African American Perspective," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2020, pp. 22-24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jan Richardson, *Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas*, (Wanton Gospeller Press: Orlando, FL, 1998), Introduction xvii.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, from his book *Thoughts in Solitude*.