

Stay Awake: Salvation is Nigh
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Reading: Mark 13:24-37

An expectation in Fear or of Hope?

I always have an initial shock when I read the Mark text at the beginning of Advent in year B of the Revised Common Lectionary. Every third year this passage heralds the beginning of this period of waiting for the celebration of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. As many of us know from last week's Sunday School lesson, there is no birth account in the book of Mark. This is both startling and, in this season of hope, anticlimactic. We want our crèche, our shepherds, our annunciation of Mary and our barnyard animals. To have them missing in this season is like telling us that Christmas has been cancelled and that we are going to move straight to Lent.

I loved John's description of his students at Menaul School when they encounter this absence in the text for the first time. There is a visceral disappointment, disbelief and outrage. It sounded like some of the students felt they were being robbed of something essential to their faith. They possess something that many of us have lost, the outrage in loss of something important to our faith.

This is, however, not the main reason that I am surprised by this text being our opening gospel text for the Advent season. It has to more to do with my past than it does with the text itself. This text has been used in recent evangelical church history to expound a particular fairly recent understanding of the end times. It is part of the wildly financially lucrative "Left Behind" series and is concerned with the Rapture.

I was taught to wait in fear for that day. Hoping that I was ready to be taken up in the clouds to be saved from tribulations that would befall the heathen hoards left behind. There would be blood, fire, Armageddon and an antichrist thrown into the mix. So, watch your step, save your friends, plead with your family to ask people into their heart to escape eternal damnation!

Praise Jesus I no longer hold to that theology of fear!

Waiting in Fear

Of course, there is plenty of theology of fear being peddled for a lucrative fee by many quarters of the church at the expense of Gospel (good news). This season is rife with anxiety, depression and sadness enough through an attrition to the human condition that it doesn't need a shove from Biblical opportunists. Some of us may be just holding on in anticipation that this season might end without its requisite drama.

A friend on Facebook had a post that asked for four words that would ruin Thanksgiving. I thought about it and realized it was just as easy to do this for Christmas. Here are some from my own history:

"Your aunt stole it."

"Your Grandpa is drunk."

“Dad is at work.”
“Grandma is mad.”
“Jim has a gun.”

Whew, I think I just realized that I shouldn't love this holiday as much as I do.

We fill this time with so much unrealistic expectations that can never be filled by anyone on this planet. Maybe we miss a spouse, children or grandchildren. Maybe we remember when things were so much more. We might be lonely, depressed, filled with anxiety and these all culminate in a season of fear.

Then we come to church and it isn't filling our expectations as well. We look back and are unhappy at where we are or we look forward and are unhappy that we do not fulfill the promise we think the church should represent. Or just maybe we worry that there aren't as many people showing up for church this season and we see the shell of a church on the next block. We are afraid that a place that has been so important for our faith might disappear and a season like this highlights this for us.

We have replaced the scripture of hope with the impending doom that we see around us. We wait in fear for the fulfillment of our worst expectations.

Waiting in Hope

Of course, there should be no reason this text should be a text of terror. It is heralding the hopeful gathering of the elect and the anticipation of the coming of the Lord. Foolishly, we cling to hope more ardently than to despair as followers of Jesus Christ.

He will save his people from their sins. Last time I checked my Bible, waiting on fear is participation in the sin of this world. This world is a hopeless mess. That is why our waiting in expectation is exactly what this world needs. It is what we need. I won't lie, it is what I need. When the world is in tumult. When it seems our sun is darkening, our stars are falling from the sky and even heaven is shaken, we still wait in hope that Immanuel is coming!

We believe that like a hen gathers her chicks, we will be gathered in from earth to heaven by his power and glory. Shouldn't that give us hope? We don't know when or where Jesus will appear, but when he is incarnated amongst us, we will know that the divine has walked amongst us. Unlike others, we know that Christ's appearance amongst us is a mystery. We are not charged with knowing the details, we are charged with staying awake, preparing the hay for our messiah's head, and having hope in a world that has lost hope. Thanks be to God.