

Messiah Moravian Church (Virtual Sermon)
First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2020
Gospel Text: Mark 13:24-37
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WE JUST DON'T KNOW

Happy New Year, Messiah friends! I know, it's not January yet, even though most of us would like to dump 2020 in the trashcan right now. For Christians, it's a new Church year that begins with this first Sunday in Advent.

I am grateful for inspiration about today's gospel passage that comes from a devotional written by Pastor Sarah W. Wiles.

Advent—the season of preparation for Christmas, the season of waiting and hoping, the season of shepherds and angels and babies meek and mild.

But how does the lectionary begin Advent? Mark opens the season with apocalyptic warnings and images of falling stars, the darkened sun and moon, avenging angels and sleepy servants.

I confess that I don't like Mark's vision. I prefer the cute Christmas, the one with sweet, innocent children in angel and shepherd costumes, mumbling their lines in front of loved ones. But, in the words of that iconic rock'n roll philosopher Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones, "You can't always get what you want." So instead we get an Advent with descriptions of the Second Coming and scenes from the Left Behind series.

But what if we left all the apocalyptic imagery behind and looked at this passage from another perspective. What strikes me is Mark's persistent theme that nobody knows. Nobody knows what is going to happen--we don't know, the angels don't know, even Jesus doesn't know. Four times in these short verses Mark tells us, we just don't know.

How does Jesus arrive? No one knows, so use your imagination. Is it a once and for all event? Or is it an event that is repeated again each year, like Christmas? Or could Jesus's arrival be happening all the time?

Bernard of Clairvaux, 12th century abbot and theologian, wrote about three Advents. First came the Incarnation, the Advent of Christmas. The third and last Advent is the Second Coming, or Parasouia, at the end of the ages. The second or middle Advent is the every day arrival of Jesus: the stranger at the table, the still small voice, the hungry mother, the weary refugee. In other words, Jesus comes to us again and again in unexpected places and at unexpected hours.

We just don't know. Do you imagine Jesus is arriving in your life and in the world in some spectacular and unmistakable event? Or do you think Jesus's arrival has already started, maybe an event so subtle it requires careful attention to notice?

That's the way I like to imagine it. After all, most folks missed the first arrival of Jesus. What could be more insignificant or unspectacular than yet another baby born in poverty? But more and more I believe God shows up in small ways. So, stay awake, Jesus says. Slow down and pay attention.

Where is Christ hiding? How is God's love appearing? What is being revealed that once was hidden? We just don't know.

In the Zen tradition there is a meditative practice called the Don't Know Mind. In this exercise one breathes in and then on the exhalation mentally repeats the phrase "Don't know," "Don't know," "Don't know." The purpose of the exercise is to let go of preconceived notions and certainty and instead to cultivate curiosity with open eyes and heart.

Mark is no Zen master but he probably would be comfortable with the Don't Know way. We believe and trust that Jesus is coming but we don't know how or when. We need to pay attention because Jesus may be arriving all around us if we only have eyes to see.

Mary Oliver, one of my favorite modern poets, has three simple instructions for living: pay attention, be astonished and tell about it. Pay Attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

That just about sums up the whole Christmas story, doesn't it? Pay attention like Mary and Joseph feeling each kick of the unborn Child. Pay attention like humble shepherds watching the night sky split open. Pay attention like scholars scanning the heavens for the faint glimmer of a strange light. Pay attention, Jesus is arriving.

I wonder, what if this Advent season we were to follow Mary Oliver's advice rather than focus on the chaotic, anxious times swirling around us? What if we pay attention to our lives, even to our breath, which is our constant companion, emblematic of the Holy Spirit abiding in us? Or pay attention to the small kindnesses of strangers, the way someone lets us go first in line or the special care and courtesy of a clerk processing and packaging our purchase? Pay attention to signs of hope in the world, no matter how seemingly insignificant. Pay attention to the smallest sparks of peace and change wherever they appear. Pay attention, Jesus is arriving.

Be astonished, like shepherds in a field, like a first-time mother giving birth, like wise scholars tracking a star, like a unsettling dream too vivid to ignore. As Mark reminds us, we cannot even imagine how God is arriving in our lives. So pay attention, be astonished.

Tell about it. Call or write a friend and tell her what you have seen and felt. In a quiet moment share your news with a loved one. In prayer thank God for it. Pay attention, be astonished, tell about it.

Yes, Christ arrives, not once, but again and again and again, sometimes slowly, at times suddenly, frequently subtly. If we're awake, we'll see. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.

PRAYER: Please join me in this prayer written by pastor and professor Will Willimon.

Lord, you came to us when we least expected. We thought that all hope for humanity was lost, or that it was up to humanity to save ourselves or we would not be saved, or that some god or other would swoop down from the heavens and deliver us.

Then you came to us in the dark of night, born to Mary and Joseph; you came to us as a baby. Lord, forgive us when we don't see you because we look in the wrong places... or because we expect you to come in power, majesty, and glory rather than in humility, poverty, and meekness.

Lord, help us to experience your birth among us. God with us. God with us not on our terms, but on your terms, as a baby, Jesus, a human one who took upon himself our humanity that we might be brought back to God. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

From this moment onward, may our hearts be full of room, for this Prince of Peace, who is God with us, whenever and wherever we find Him. Amen