



## “Circle of Light: Promise”

First Sunday of Advent  
Saturday and Sunday, November 2-3, 2017  
All Services  
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Mark 13:24–37

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Earlier this week I came across an eyewitness account of how an occupying army paid retribution upon its uncooperative citizens. I give fair warning, it's not for the faint of heart:

*While the (holy place) blazed, the victors plundered everything that fell in their way. They slaughtered wholesale all who were caught. No pity was shown for age, no reverence for rank; children and (elderly), laity and priests alike were massacred; every class was pursued and encompassed in the grasp of war, whether (begging) for mercy or offering resistance. . .*

*And the din - nothing more deafening or appalling could be conceived than the noise: there were the war-cries of the (armies) sweeping onward in mass; the howls of the people who, cut off above, fled panic-stricken only to fall into the arms of the foe; and their shrieks as they met their fate . . .*

*But yet more awful than the uproar were the sufferings. You would indeed have thought that the temple-hill was boiling over from its base, being everywhere one mass of flame, but yet that the stream of blood was more copious than the flames and the slain more numerous than the slayers. For the ground was nowhere visible through the corpses; but the soldiers had to clamber over the heaps of bodies in pursuit of the fugitives. . .*

We ourselves here in the U.S. have had awful things happen these past several months: We've had senseless killings, first by a maniac in Nevada, and then by a former military reject attacking a congregation in Texas. We've endured hurricanes Harvey, Irma & Maria, which devastated vast tracts of Texas Florida, & most of Puerto Rico. Some of those places were still rebuilding from Katrina, and this trio comes along.

Then this week we have heard all these allegations, accusations, and charges of sexually inappropriate behavior brought against many individuals; people from all walks of life, people in positions of power - politicians, entertainment, news people - who used that position of influence to bend subordinates to their sexual desire.

We've all heard about the raging fires in the western states, and a years-long drought on the coast, that when it finally broke, the nearly overwhelming rains caused flooding

and landslides.

Maybe in central PA we're a bit inoculated. We haven't had droughts that in turn brought about fires. We haven't felt the wrath of the hurricanes, really; just the after-effects of wind and rain, nothing nearly as destructive as what struck the south-east.

Here in the mid-state, we're a bit dulled by the sex-scandal reports and trials, since we endured our own, so those allegations don't seem to shock us. And we have had to learn how to live with our own mass shooting in the form of West Nickel Mines from a few years ago. So, while we mourn with the nation over reasonless loss of life, those reports open up our own wounds, and too often we get so turned inwards with our memories, that we tune out the trauma the greater part of the nation is going through.

But regardless of how in tune or out of things we might be, this pain and suffering and hurt goes on. And we care, **or** we don't care, **or** we're somewhere in between. I'm not sure it really matters. I wonder if that's not how the people in our gospel reading are feeling like.

This text is one of what we call "apocalyptic" texts. You're probably familiar with the word *Apocalypse*, although you've more than likely heard it used in terms of *end times*, or *total destruction*. But in Christian terms, "apocalypse" means, literally, "revelation," something being revealed. That's why the last book of the new Testament, while in Greek is literally titled *The Apocalypse of John*, it is usually translated into English as *The Revelation of John*, or simply *Revelation* (it's singular, *not* plural. It's one LONG revelation, not a bunch of them).

I think that is what is happening in our reading from Mark. Jesus was in the temple, teaching his followers, and anyone else who wanted to join in the conversation (as is evidenced earlier in the chapter when people from the various religious factions come by to attempt to trip him up). Jesus goes off on kind of a tangent. He wants folks to understand a *couple* of things. **First**, he wants folks to know that *following him* is going to *alienate them* from others - alienate them to the point of bloodshed. He *also* wants them to know that he *will* return, so he tells them what to look for. And it's not pretty:

<sup>24</sup> ¶ "... in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

In the midst of this coming darkness, he also gives a bit of a promise:

<sup>28</sup> ¶ "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. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. . . <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Hope in the darkness. That's what Jesus gives to his hearers; two thousand-ish years ago, as well as today. And the folks in Jesus' day needed to hear this word of hope, as they waited for Jesus to lead them against their enemies, and restore Israel to its position of power. That is what they were expecting the messiah was going to do.

The first hearers of Mark's gospel really needed to hear this promise of hope as well. That opening I read, the blood and death and destruction? That was all about the Jewish revolt, which happened roughly 66-72 AD, when the Roman legions laid siege, which led to the destruction of the Temple and the razing of Jerusalem. That description I read came from a book called **The Jewish War**, by a Jewish rebel turned Roman named Josephus.

The residents of Jerusalem needed a sign of hope. The first century believers were expecting Jesus to return - **Soon!** and when he wasn't there yet, Mark, through the words of Jesus, gave the people the hope they needed, a reminder of the promise that Jesus made:

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Jesus will return. He will come again. We call him Immanuel, which means literally *God with us*, for a reason: God **is** with us in all that happens to us, the good and gracious and wonderful; **and** God is with us when all the awful, horrible, destructive things happen as well. God. Is. With. Us.

**And**, Jesus *will* return. He will bring the light that never goes out. He will *stop* all destruction and chaos and killings, and bring about the *new world*.

So, we prepare. We get ready. And we wait; **knowing** that Jesus *will* come. Because he promised. And Christ always keeps his word.

Amen.

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