

Hope in Times of Trial
Mark 13:32-37
November 29, 2020

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Many people think of the Advent Season as a time to get ready for Christmas. On a practical level it is true; it is the time to put up Christmas decorations, to prepare Christmas presents, and to prepare for family gatherings and other activities. No doubt that it is an exciting time. It is a time that is filled with celebrations. We usually have parties to attend or host or both. However, this year could be a little different because of the current pandemic but I am sure we will still celebrate it somehow.

The Season of Advent, however, is actually the time to get ready for the Second Coming of Christ. We usually don't spend much time thinking about the imminent return of Christ. We are just busy taking care of ourselves and the events of our lives. This is especially true in this season. We are concerned about our own lives, bills to pay, things to take care of.

There are some Christians who make Christ's return their primary preoccupation. Some put up signs on the freeway and preach a message about the end-time on street corners. Some write books about the end-time in great detail. When you see some things that happen in modern days that coincide with the descriptions of biblical end-time, we can agree that the end of the world is near.

However, Jesus warned us that no one knows when the day of his return will be. No one knows when the world as we know it, will come to an end. One thing I know for sure is that we are one day closer to the day of Christ's return today than yesterday. We must take Jesus' warning seriously and be ready to welcome him.

Jesus said: "Therefore, keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

This is a dramatic warning, don't you think? "What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

I want to call your attention to his words: "whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn . . ." What is the significance of this? Why did he spell out these four specific times?

Dr. Tomas Long is a retired professor from Candler School of Theology. He taught preaching. He suggested that these four different times – evening, midnight, cockcrow, and dawn could have a special meaning in the rest of the Gospel of Mark.¹ Let's look at them one at a time.

“Keep watch,” says the Lord, “because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back whether in the evening . . .” What could “the evening” point to? “The evening” is the time of betrayal.

In the next chapter, Mark tells us about the Passover meal Jesus had with his disciples. It was his last meal. Mark describes it this way: “when it was evening . . . as they were eating, Jesus said ‘Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.’”²

“The evening” points to the time of betrayal. It points to Judas Iscariot's betrayal. However, it wasn't just Judas who betrayed Jesus that night. When Judas came to Jesus with the crowd to arrest him, all the disciples deserted him, every one of them. They all ran away from him. Betrayal was committed by all his disciples, not just by Judas Iscariot. The question is, “Do we, as the followers of Christ, also betray Jesus? If we do, how do we do that? When do we betray him?”

Look at the way we celebrate Christmas. Could the way we celebrate Christmas be a betrayal against the Lord? Celebrating Santa Claus instead of celebrating Christ the Lord; giving ourselves expensive gifts instead of giving gifts to him; having all kinds of parties without realizing what we are truly celebrating and why we are celebrating Christmas; could these be a betrayal against the Lord?

Christmas has become commercialized for so long in our world that even Christians seem to forget why we celebrate Christmas. So could the way we celebrate Christmas be a betrayal against the Lord?

What about the time when we choose sin over virtue, when we choose selfish desires over what is right and what the Lord expects of us, wouldn't it be a betrayal against the Lord?

When we sing “I love you, Lord” yet our behaviors and actions demonstrate something quite different, wouldn't it be a betrayal against the Lord? Betrayal

¹ The basic outline for this message is loosely based on a passage in Dr. Tom Long's book *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1987).

² Mark 14:17-18.

comes in many forms. The important thing is to remember that the Lord may return at any moment, and we need to examine ourselves constantly.

What about “the midnight”? What is the significance of it? In the Gospel of Mark, the midnight is the time when the disciples neglected their duty.

After the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciple went to the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus told the disciples to stay awake and pray with him while he pleaded with the Father. It was the most agonizing and tormenting time for Jesus. It was when Jesus asked the Father to take away the cup of suffering and death from him. Still he realized it was the Father’s will for him to bear it. Can you imagine the agony in his heart? So, he asked his disciples to pray with him.

Twice that night, Jesus returned to the disciples and found them sleeping instead of praying with him.³ They neglected their duty. They failed him.

Do we neglect our duty? Do we neglect our call as the Church? We are called to make a difference in this world. Are we doing that faithfully? Have we been sleeping on the job? Have we, the United Methodist Church, been sleeping while the Lord has kept calling us to be awake?

One time a man went to his doctor and asked him if he could help with a snoring problem. The man said, “As soon as I fall asleep, I begin to snore and I snore loudly. It happens all the time. What can I do doctor?”

The doctor asked, “Does it bother your wife?”

He hesitated for a moment and then said, “It disturbs the whole congregation.”

When our world is experiencing moral decay, we, the church, need to be awake. Advent is a great time to examine ourselves as individuals and as the Church, whether we have been faithful or not. It is the time to truly examine ourselves and our Church’s mission and purpose.

What about “the cockcrow”? This is the time of testing and trial, and even failure. We all know what happened when the rooster crowed, don’t we? After the Last Supper, as they went out to the Mount of Olives, Jesus said to his disciples, “You will all fall away . . .” And Peter protested, “Even if all fall away, I will not.”

³ Mark 14:32-42.

Jesus said to Peter, “Tonight before the rooster crows twice you will deny me three times.”

But Peter asserted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you.” And what happened that night? Peter denied Christ three times. When Peter denied Jesus the first time, he heard a rooster crowed. When he denied Jesus the third time, the rooster crowed the second time, and Peter remembered what Jesus said. And he wept bitterly.⁴ “The time when rooster crows” refers to the time of testing, trial, and failure. No matter what we have been experiencing in life – trials, hardships, confusions, betrayals, spiritual and moral desolations – the Lord wants us to return to him and be ready for his return.

Have you ever wept because you know you have violated your own principles and virtues? The good news is we can change while we have an opportunity. The first Advent brought to us the grace of God that is constantly available. That grace was available to Peter even when he denied his relationship with the Lord. Jesus did not stop loving him. God’s grace is far greater than any intentional or unintentional misdeeds. The important thing is to accept God’s grace and return to him.

What about “the dawn”? What is the significance of it? The dawn is the time of surprise, exhilaration, and hope. The dawn is when the Christ was risen from the dead. It is the time of resurrection, the time of celebration, the time of victory.

It reminds us that even when everything is going our way and life is good, we need to be ever ready to face the Lord. We will meet the Lord one of two ways. One, when the Lord Jesus returns. Two, when we die. Either moment is not known to us. The Lord may return any day, and we may die any moment.

One thing we need to remember is that God’s grace to forgive us and to accept us is always available, and we stay close to the Lord each and every day. May this Season of Advent be a time for all of us to renew and deepen our relationship with the Lord!

⁴ Mark 14:66-72.