

The First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017
Mark 13:24-37
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What does the end of the world feel like?

Walking into work one day, facing the unfinished project, the mess on your desk, or the unread emails and the boss calls you in; by the end of the day you have loaded the last five years of your work life into a cardboard box and you walk out of the door.

What does the end of the world feel like?

The call from the doctor's office, "We didn't like what we saw on the scan; we'd like you to come in for another scan." You hardly hear when the doctor says "cancer" because all week that word has been forming and exploding in your head like balloons made of glass.

What does the end of the world feel like?

The news that the DREAM Act has been repealed, your health insurance has gone up again, the new tax cut for corporations and the wealthy has passed both houses. When will the bad news end?

What does the end of the world feel like?

Your sister calls to tell you your nephew has committed suicide, she is caring for his two young children. Christmas will never be the same again.

What does the end of the world feel like?

It is the beginning of the church year, so here we are in a new gospel, Mark, the first and oldest account of Jesus and his followers. They are discouraged. Jesus coming back in a blaze of glory to stun the Romans and the religious hierarchy into submission hasn't materialized. They are losing heart. Why follow the way? Why continue to suffer? There had better be a reward someday.

When someone tells me how hard their life is, how they are suffering, it is tempting to promise them that life will get better, that disease will be conquered, that anger will subside, debts will get paid, a child will behave, death will hold off. But I can't promise those things. Sometimes life gets worse.

And it did get worse for those early followers of Jesus. They were rejected by their families, lost jobs, called names, arrested, tortured, even killed. And so the author of the gospel of Mark falls for a different temptation; life is bad now, but Jesus is coming back and he's going to get all the bad guys. But then he realizes he can't promise that either, because he remembers hearing Jesus say that no one knows the day or the hour. And clearly no one got the time line right because two thousand years later the sun and moon are still shining and the stars are in place, despite our human tendency towards self-destruction.

Advent is a season of preparation, but don't get fooled into thinking it is about preparing for the celebration of Christmas, "the most wonderful time of the year" that is about to arrive. It isn't about decorating, buying gifts and preparing for the feast, though all those things can be delightful. Advent is a season of preparing for Emmanuel, God-with-us, by noticing that God is already here.

God is already with us. Jesus points us to signs of what we already know.

Which means that when the world is falling in on us, when we lose a job, lose our health, suffer the death of loved ones, fear for our financial future we need to pay attention. God is with us. We need not deny our suffering, push it away, or hurry through it. We must discover how God is in it with us. And our lives and the world might get better, or they might get worse. There may be signs of hope or no light at the end of the tunnel. Still God is with us.

So Jesus reminds his followers and us "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come." Jesus has left them, has left us, like the owner of a house going on a long journey, and now we are in charge, each with our own work to do. So what is the work we need to do? What are we suppose to see? Pay attention to?

Jesus' followers are worried about the destruction of the world as they know it. Jesus calls our attention to something simple and immediate, "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."

I saw new leaves in our garden yesterday, yellow forsythia, pink mulberry, green boxwood. But it isn't spring! It's December. Suddenly global warming and the destruction of our plant seem too close for comfort. Is this what I am supposed to see?

Think globally, act locally. Oh?!

"and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken...from the fig tree learn its lesson..."

Think globally, act locally.

Losing your voice on Saturday, might make it impossible to work on Sunday. "Stop talking, tea with honey, put a towel over your head and breath above a bowl of boiling water, rest."
Your health is failing, what can you do to be healthy today?
Think globally, act locally.

The gap between the rich and the poor is widening, your own debt is piling up.
What will you give away today?
Think globally, act locally.

A loved one has died, the pain is unbearable.
What can you do to remember and honor them today?
Think globally, act locally.

Our planet is suffering from overuse and abuse.
What choices will you make today?
Think globally, act locally.

To do this we must keep awake, pay attention. Keep Awake! For some of us that means slowing down, for others it means paying attention, or changing our priorities. Keep awake! could be a signal to set aside worries, live in the present, heal the past, let go of our expectations for the future.

What does the end of the world look like?

Think globally, act locally.

I'm awake! I'm awake Jesus! What do you want me to see?