

*“Ultimate Advent”*  
*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. R. Scott Herr*  
*First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 29, 2020*

*PLEASE READ:*  
*Isaiah 64:1-9*  
*Mark 13:24-37*

Here in the United States, Thanksgiving is the signal that it is time to put up Christmas lights. Thanks to a generous donor, we have our own beautiful Christmas Tree with lights set up at the church. I hope you enjoy it here on the front lawn as you drive by in the evening. Even though Christmas lights here in New Canaan have been up for a couple of weeks, I haven't seen any manger scenes yet.

Interestingly, the Gospel-writer Mark also decided to cut out the nativity in his take on the Good News of Jesus Christ. While most Christians love to focus on sweet baby Jesus and soft candlelight at this time of year, Mark reminds us with star showers, shadowy suns, and shaking heavens that the Advent, or “coming” of our Lord is not always so docile and demure.

As I've said, this first Sunday of Advent is the first Sunday of the Christian calendar. It is, if you will, the Christian New Year day, and it may come as a surprise to you that we talk about the end of time to understand the beginning of our faith. There are four divine advents we remember: First, we celebrate the coming of Jesus 2,000 years ago. Secondly, we reflect on Christ coming amid our lives here and now; thirdly, we reflect on how Christ comes into our world in and through us; and finally, we anticipate the ultimate Advent of Christ, what some people refer to (mistakenly) as the “second coming of Christ.”

The Gospel lesson today speaks about this ultimate Advent or final coming of Jesus. "...In those days, following that distress, 'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken... At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory... No one knows about that day or hour...Therefore keep watch..."

This ominous vision depicts the final day when the very lights of the universe as we know it, will be snuffed out, and all of history will be brought to a shuddering climax. In contrast with the peaceful manger scene, here is the terrifying teaching of Jesus. We cannot dismiss it; the whole of Scripture and the creeds affirm; the Son of Man shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.

In a world where the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer, where war seems to be proposed and planned based on egos. Where the pandemic surges and where there are murder and rape, political corruption, and confusion in even the most civilized societies, today's teaching packs more than the usual punch. Given the news on world affairs, *judgment* begins to sound rather *apropos*; the wrath of the Lord upon all that is wrong seems right.

For all the beauty and goodness in the world, we of Christian faith unabashedly confess not only the evil of our world, in our communities but also our own lives. We echo Isaiah's cry; how can we be saved? “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth... our iniquities, like the wind, take us away..."

It amazes me that Isaiah says that all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. That pretty much renders our religious attempts at self-justification rather futile, doesn't it? Think about it. The whole “Look busy, Jesus is coming” approach to religion is pointless. There's nothing you can

do to make yourself ready for God's judgment. There's nothing you can do to make yourself righteous before the Lord.

I don't know about you, but that is disturbing to me! At best, we confess we can only wait for that final day when God's glorious power to save us, is fully revealed. It's important to understand the basis of our hope.

In his book, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, René Girard talks about a dynamic that is found in all human societies. He calls it the "cycle of mimetic violence." [1] What he means is that there is a contagion in humanity, where we need to blame someone for the problems we are experiencing, and so when things get really bad, we need to imitate the old, old story of finding a scapegoat, a victim, to mete out justice and thus, at least temporarily, "solve" the problem and move forward. It happens to the best of us.

It's a dynamic that gets worked out on a very personal level, as well as on a global scale. It's why genocide often goes with war; why terrorists find specific passport holders to terrorize; why Jews or gays or blacks or women are singled out in history to take the brunt of society's judgment and condemnation. In our Isaiah passage, it's there, "We sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed..." Throughout history, this dynamic is played out among individuals and societies in countless scenarios of violence and war. It's the "contagion" that catches us all.

This is paradoxically why the ultimate Advent of Jesus is good news for us. The good news in this frightening text is that the suffering of violence is not the last word. Christians talk about the *eschaton* (the end time) with hope, because Jesus will have the last word. Note that Jesus says, "after that suffering..." Another way to translate this is "following that distress..." Here is an assertion that history is not finally in the hands of we who are caught up in the cycles of mimetic violence, but rather history is in the hands of the living God, in the hands of our merciful Creator, the potter whose hands formed us in love.

The astonishing good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that God has taken the role of scapegoat: of the victim to vanquish the need for any more sacrifice. God has absorbed the ultimate wrath or punishment so that we are free from divine punishment. This is a freedom that comes through faith in Christ that we cannot accomplish on our own. Through faith in the new resurrection reality, we find a new way to live into the future because we know that the future will be consummated in the coming of the Resurrected Christ, who has already declared that we are forgiven and made new, that we are beloved.

We wait in hope knowing that history is moving toward a God-designed, God-timed completion when Christ shall reign forever and ever. We wait knowing Christ will come. We just don't know *when*.

"Therefore, keep awake!" Jesus says... "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!" The word is *gregoreite* in the Greek language, the same word Jesus uses in the Garden of Gethsemane to ask Peter, James, and John to stay awake to pray with him. *Gregoreite!* Stay awake!" Ironically, at this end of the world vision, Jesus focuses us away from the future and into the present. He recognizes that the effect of sin is a kind of anesthetic. In our sinfulness, we tend to go to sleep in life.

Have you noticed that one of the main symptoms of brokenness, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually, is the desire to sleep? That's why addiction is so deadly. You keep craving more and more, something that gives you less and less. And so, you'll drink more and more, up the dosage higher and higher to numb the pain.

Whatever form of sleep you may be in, Jesus says abruptly, "Wake up!" Echoing Isaiah, Mark at either end of the Gospel asserts that in Christ, God has ripped open the heavens and draws near to us. Karl Marx once quipped that religion is the opiate of the masses. I think quite the opposite. Faith is rather the amphetamines of life and wakes us up to anticipating God breaking into our reality, expecting God to show up. My brother used to have an amusing sticker on his bathroom mirror. It read: *Today is not a dress rehearsal!*

Jesus reminds us that each day of our lives matters or *can* matter if we wake up to the fact that we are already saved and that our future is secure. That means that we are free to live in God's new heaven and earth. We have a choice: We can live each day alertly anticipating, expecting, preparing for the Lord's arrival, or we can mindlessly somnambulate through the days, weeks, months, and years of our lives.

For us to see our lives and what ways in which we can best receive our Lord's Advent today, we confess our need to stay awake, to be *listening* and *watching* for God's Word to us anew. Jesus' teaching about the end times is a good antidote to the sentimentality of the holidays. It alerts us to the startling fact that God is coming is disruptive to the status quo and is an opportunity to reorient our lives to how reality should be and will be one day.

I was moved by the story of Breno Donatti, founder of Winfield Coffee in Stamford. Like many business owners, he saw a crisis emerging with the pandemic, but like any good leader, he didn't miss the opportunity in this particular crisis. He realized COVID-19 would put a lot of people out of work and increase the need for food programs. He did some quick math. Five dollars can provide a healthy meal for a hungry person, and at his Coffee shop, a typical ticket was 15 dollars. So, he decided if he could get his customers to add five dollars to their bill, he would donate that extra five dollars to feed the hungry. He created the program called *Giving Back*, and for every twenty dollars, he would donate a meal. As of last month, Winfield Coffee donated 2,000 meals, and other businesses joined the program!

The New Canaan Rotary Club had to decide about the annual Lobsterfest last month. How do you serve lobster meals in a pandemic? It was tempting to cancel. But with a little ingenuity and online capability, they did drive through pick-ups and raised more money than last year, all for charity! The Exchange Club of New Canaan is selling Christmas trees and wreaths down at Kiwanis Park. One of the members of our church said you pay more, but all the proceeds go to charity. They hope to raise *400,000 dollars* to give away. And we as a church are doing our share with the Dove program, as families will know that we care about them.

Staying awake to God's future doesn't mean living in fear. It means living with creative hope. It means living now what it will be like in God's future. It means making your pledge and giving generously to our church so we can continue to make a difference in the lives of our children and youth, our families, and beloved seniors. Making sure those who are hungry have the food they need, making sure those who are afraid in their own homes have a place to turn. It means forgiving those who hurt you, talking to somebody you trust about your addictions - so you are not alone in your struggle, telling that friend or family member that you love them, that you are thankful for them.

Friends today is your wake-up call. As we begin this Advent season, we light a candle and put up our Christmas trees. May the lights remind us to pursue an *Advent – New Year's resolution*, to stay awake, to stay alive to everything good and true and beautiful.

That is the Good news even of this dramatic vision of the Ultimate Advent: our Saviour is coming when we least expect it. Our God comes to gather even us into the new heaven and new earth! So, what I say to you, I say to all, "Stay awake!"

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.*

[1] René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 19