

The Advent Of Hope

Texts: Isaiah 64: 1-9; Howard Zinn, *To be hopeful in bad times*; Mark 13: 24-37

Date: 11/29/2020

Happy New Year!

What, you think I'm a little early?

Not in the church I'm not! Last Sunday was the final Sunday of the church year. On that final Sunday of the year, if we hadn't been finishing up our Stewardship series, we would have celebrated Christ the King, the exalted Jesus, full in power, full in judgment, reigning in glory, complete with sheep and a side of goats. It would have been the apocalyptic culmination of the entire church year! Woo-hoo!

With Advent, which begins today, we start a new year in the church calendar, and a new gospel, this time, the gospel according to St. Mark.

Christmas is coming and it's time to go back to the beginning of the story to talk about Jesus' birth.

We're ready for the stories we know so well:

The angel coming to Mary with the surprise pregnancy test result – spoiler: it was positive!

Joseph's struggle about whether to stay with his unfaithful girlfriend, until another angel came and said, "Dude, she really wasn't. It was God's doing."

The government statistics bureau looking to count tax units and demanding everyone go back where they came from. Wow, that does sound familiar! And 2020 is a census year, too.

The argument at the inn: "I told you to book us a room." "I didn't think it would be so crowded!" "How could you not think it would be so crowded?" "I didn't know we'd be coming at Christmas!"

We're ready for the Wise Men with the malfunctioning GPS that leads them first to wicked King Herod's palace, before they recalculate, and get to the stable where Jesus was.

We're anticipating the story of the shepherds who were trying to stay awake by counting sheep, who suddenly find themselves in an angelic production of Handel's Messiah.

I mean, we're ready for Christmas stories.

And what do we get? We get an apocalyptic, end of the world, sun and moon will be darkened watch out you don't know when I will be coming speech by Jesus!

Well, that was unexpected.

What were our lectionary writers thinking? Why didn't they give us the birth stories in Mark?

One possible reason could be that ... there are no birth stories in Mark!

At Christmas time, Mark doesn't have the goods.

So, faced with this stark reality, what are you gonna do if you're a lectionary writer and you have to choose something from the Gospel according to Mark? Well, this. Since there's nothing about the beginning of Jesus' first coming, stick in another bit about the Second Coming. Be awake! Be watchful! You don't know when it's going to happen!

That may seem like cheating a little bit. But maybe our lectionary writers have a deeper idea than mere necessity. Perhaps they want us to see the baby Jesus more clearly by beginning our reflections on the hope we have in Jesus Christ by thinking about his birth in the light of the Second Coming.

In Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the habits of highly effective lectionary writers, I mean people, is to know the end from the beginning.

That is, you can't get to where you want to go... if you don't know where that is... when you're setting out.

Maybe the lectionary's deeper point is that you can't really understand the hope that comes from the beginning of the Christmas story if you don't understand where it's all going to end up.

It's not, after all, the fact of a baby being born—babies are born all the time—but the reality of who that baby is that makes all the difference.

If you've been watching *The Crown* on Netflix, you know that a baby being born to the Queen is a big deal. It's not because people are happy for the Queen, that she's become a mother, or at least, not just that. It's because everyone knows that this baby is going to grow up to be King. This baby is born to rule, as it were, the sovereign in a constitutional democracy. Everyone knows that baby's destiny at the moment of its birth.

In the same way, by putting one more text about Jesus coming in glory into our minds at the very beginning of the Christmas season, the lectionary reminds us that this baby born in Bethlehem is the Savior who one day will come in clouds with great power and glory. He is the baby who is born to rule.

The emphasis on this baby's royal, ruling, destiny makes the very fact of the baby born in the stable all the more remarkable.

The one who will one day come in glorious fire, came first in infant flesh; the one who will one day come with quaking came first with crying.

Jesus will one day come in the clouds as ruler, but first he comes in the hay as Savior; he will one day come as the undeniable Lord, but at Christmas he comes first as the adorable infant; one day he will come to condemn sin, but first he comes to comfort sinners.

The baby born in Bethlehem calls all to repentance and faith, to confession and forgiveness of sins, to enter into a relationship of love and trust with him so that we stand by his side and he stands by our side.

There is something about a baby that just brings about love in human hearts. We see a baby and we go, "ooh, ah, what a beautiful child, may I hold it?" A baby is approachable, open, inviting.

It's not usually so when we think about God! Mostly we think about God like the lectionary reading: kind of frightening, vaguely threatening, with great power over us. By putting this lectionary reading in here, at the beginning of Advent, when our minds are focused instead on the baby Jesus, our lectionary writers remind us that the God we may find a little terrifying is also the God who came in the flesh as an infant.

Apparently, God's purpose for coming was to make us love and trust God in the most non-threatening way possible, and a baby certainly accomplishes that goal.

God offers Godself now as friend and confidante, as rescuer and redeemer, as leader and healer. God offers Godself to us now as a baby, in flesh and blood, among us, with us, for us, on our side.

The lectionary reminds us that the one who will rule the world is the one whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. And that continues to give us hope because we realize that the ruler is the one who has been with us all along.

The ruler is not some stranger, some God we've never met, but our friend and ally, the one who understands us, who's been in our shoes, or maybe sandals, and whose entire life, if we watch it closely now, exudes love and forgiveness, a witness to mercy and grace.

The new church year starts with another look at the end, so as we set out on this journey with Jesus we know where it's headed. With open eyes, we can see the clues along the way about who this is we have chosen to follow, and what kind of ruler he's going to be: the kindest, most loving, most forgiving ruler the world has ever known. And that is a reason to hope indeed.