

## **“An Advent Letter to an Absent Lord”**

A sermon for Advent 1, December 3 2023

Texts: Mark 13:24-37 (Isaiah 64:1-9)

Good morning. One of the more challenging features of preaching from the lectionary texts – which we do periodically at BMC - is that you don't have much choice over your texts. Well, wasn't I surprised then when the Gospel text for the first Sunday of Advent wasn't something from Luke 1 or Matthew 1 – it wasn't the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, which we looked at during Experiencing the Story, for example. Instead, we have this strange passage from Mark 13 – a passage that appears late in Jesus' ministry and that in apocalyptic fashion describes a day when “the sun will be darkened, when the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven,” a time when the son of man is seen coming in clouds with great power and glory. I sympathize with the words of writer and artist Jan Richardson when in her book *Through the Advent Door*, she says about this Advent text:

...I have been wishing for an easier start to the season, for words that would welcome us into these weeks with a more graceful sense of hospitality. This passage doesn't so much beckon us across the threshold as it throws open a door, tosses a cup of cold water in our face to wake us, and shoves us through.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson, “Door 2: Signs and Wonders,” *Through the Advent Door*.

Our hymn of preparation, “Sleepers, Wake” could be thought of as that cold cup of water thrown in our face. “Get up! Something’s coming this Advent that you haven’t been expecting.” Richardson goes on to note that part of the reason we may find this text from Mark 13 off-putting during Advent is because it offers us “a vision that disrupts [our] every day world...” and moves us into Advent with “a heaping serving of mystery” rather than with texts whose familiarity would bring us the usual seasonal comfort. Perhaps this text is especially appropriate for us, then, given that during Advent our worship series is structured around questions rather than stories that lead us to familiar answers. Maybe our invitation this advent is to let our questions lead us into a season of mystery and wonder, even if that makes us uncomfortable.

If that is so, our task today, then, is to somehow open ourselves to encounter the mystery and wonder of God and of our world in this strange text from Mark about signs and wonders in the heavens, about Jesus’ sudden and unexpected return, and about our need to be a people diligently watching for God to show up in our time of waiting. As I thought about how I might even *begin* to facilitate an encounter with mystery and wonder this morning through this text, a sermon geared towards teaching about it from a historical or analytic point of view just didn’t sit well with me. How can you teach mystery and wonder, after all? How can you teach about a coming hour that Jesus himself said we cannot pretend to

know about. And so, I opted for a different approach to preaching today. As Linda pointed out, our text appears within a discussion between Jesus and his disciples, and it comes after his disciples asked him a question about the future, a question that Isaiah asked in his own way generations before, and it's a question that we, generations later, continue to ask in our own time and place in history: "when will you show up, when will you tear open the heavens and come down, making your presence known? When will you make things right that have become so desperately twisted and wrong? How long, Lord?" I decided that I would ask these questions in my own way, in the form of a letter written to Jesus by a 21<sup>st</sup> century disciple in light of his long absence. Advent is a season of waiting for the coming Lord – the one who comes as a babe in a manger, but it is also the season of waiting for the one who comes with power to make all things new. But the thing about waiting is that by necessity it involves waiting for something that is presently absent in some way – waiting means we live in a tension between presence and absence, and so, I've titled my letter to Jesus "An Advent Letter to an Absent Lord." I hope it might help you, even in some small way, to enter the mystery and wonder of this season:

**Dear Lord Jesus,**

You've been gone a long time now. Every year we celebrate your birth. It's always a joyous celebration. But not long after that we move on to the next part of our church cycle. In the New Year we'll soon move into Lent – the worship material is already out- and then we'll mark your death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

It's a beautiful cycle –it gives our life rhythm and meaning each year. Every year we pray for you – babe from Bethlehem and risen Lord – to make all things new. But...where are you? How long will you be gone? In your own day so long ago, you looked to the near future and saw the fate of destruction and suffering that lay ahead for your people and their cherished places of worship - you told your disciples that soon they would experience a time of great turmoil and suffering. You promised that you would come back with great power and glory to gather your own unto you. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but it's been quite a while, Lord. Generations of your followers have lived and died. How long do we have to wait for you? I know you said "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" but I'm beginning to wonder if you'll come back at all. We could really use your help.

In our own time of upheaval and suffering, the prophet Isaiah's words are on our lips: O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" The nations are trembling, Lord, but seemingly not at your presence. Doesn't that make you angry? Just as the Jerusalem of old had its stones upended and heaped one upon another through war and violence, stones are heaped upon stones today too all over the world, including near your hometown. Will the stones of our cherished buildings be reduced to rubble too? Our story seems to stay the same, Lord. How long must we wait for you to come help?

I have a confession to make: sometimes I think you've left us to our own devices – that you've given us all we need to make it in this world and that if we can't figure it out then I guess we get what we deserve. But then I remember the grace shown to us in your incarnation – in your little innocent newborn life, in your provocative and powerful ministry, and in your solidarity with our suffering through your own death and abandonment. Why would you do all that just to leave us now? I know that you are with us through the Spirit and that you promised to be with us always, even unto the end of the age. But when exactly might that be? I know we "do not know when the time will come," and quite honestly, I'm annoyed by all the doomsdayers and prophets who make an industry out of predicting your return. I could care less about elaborate end-time scripts. What your church really longs for is healing; healing in our own lives and in our broken world; healing for the poor and the mentally distressed; healing for the sick; healing for our earth; healing that just doesn't seem possible apart from your power to save us.

Oh, Lord, you told us to stay awake, but we're tired. Not only do the nations rage, but we have our own personal trials. We struggle with meaning and purpose. Our young people grow tired and weary, our elders struggle, we face health crises of all sorts, our societies are divided across every line imaginable, and our climate is spiraling into disaster – our world is a world in desperate need and the needs seem insurmountable. Where are you? How long must we wait, Lord?

It's Advent now. We are supposed to be anticipating your coming. The sanctuary is decorated, the plays are being rehearsed. Excitement is in the air. We have the manger as our centerpiece...but our question remains: "How long must we wait?" I guess she must have wondered "how long," too? Mary, that is - she must have wondered. Her people suffered under Rome. She had her own personal struggles just like we do. It was probably easy for her to doubt that God would do anything for her – and then, "Surprise!" You came. "All generations will call me blessed," she said. And I suppose a new period of waiting began for her, even if it was a waiting shaped by a new hope. She carried you in her very self – human and divine in her womb – absent from the outer world but present in hiddenness. What a mystery. [*Pause.*] Maybe that's what you are calling us to do in our waiting – to believe that we carry you in your hiddenness – carry you in the midst of our longings, in the midst of our darkness, carry you until you might be born into our broken world again and again, Messianic signs of healing foreshadowing that day shrouded in a cloud of mystery, when all will be well.

Lord [*Pause*], if you are going to be a while yet, I have one meagre prayer request for us, the members of your church who you ask to stay awake: would you help us to stay awake? Not awake with frantic wondering and worrying about "when" – but awake with wonder at the miracle of your coming; your coming *then* by the Spirit, born of the poor girl Mary; your coming now in the stranger and the poor; your coming again, servant and Lord revealed before all. O Lord, may all generations call us blessed, us who put our hope in you. For this we pray in your name, as we wait. Amen.