

## **WHERE WE BELONG: The End of the World As We Know It**

**Mark 13:24-37**

**December 3, 2023**

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I.

Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce recently launched a new video in partnership with Pfizer, a biopharmaceutical company, with the catchphrase “two things at once.” In the video, he eats at a nice restaurant while catching a football, mows the lawn while grilling, or does an interview while hot air ballooning. At the end of the video, Kelce is in the doctor’s office getting his COVID booster and flu shots simultaneously while the narrator reminds us one final time: two things at once.

Today, friends, we are holding two things at once – an ending and a beginning.

December has arrived and, with it, an anticipation of endings. The end of a calendar year, inviting reflection on 2023 and our hopes for 2024. The end of a fiscal year, especially for churches and businesses who hope to finish strong. It is the end of a school semester for educators and students, with some preparing for a December graduation.

In the busyness of this December season, people are digging deep for the mad dash to the finish line – holiday parties, school concerts, sporting events, dance recitals, Christmas shopping, local festivities. We’re landing the plane on fumes, often tired, burned out, and in need of some time off. We are most certainly holding endings in our hearts and minds.

But we’re also holding beginnings. Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first day of the liturgical or church calendar, a calendar of seasons followed by Christian churches throughout the world focused on the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ and how we live as the people of God. The prayers and Scripture readings of Advent help us prepare for Christmas, the season beginning at sundown on Christmas Eve when Christ’s first coming is celebrated. But Advent also prepares us for Christ’s second Advent yet to come. Advent reminds us that we stand between two arrivals. We stand between the remembered joy of Christ’s birth and the anticipated joy of Christ’s appearing again.

We don’t give much attention to this second invitation of Advent, which is why you might have been confused by our scripture reading today from the Gospel of Mark about end times. The text doesn’t make for a great fireside Christmas story for children, although it might encourage all of us to be a bit more good for goodness’ sake!

Just as we are lighting our homes and streets with strings of Christmas lights to celebrate the holiday, the assigned Gospel reading today directs our attention to a coming day when all the lights will go out. While we wrap up a year exhausted and ready to sleep for days, today’s text begins the season reminding us to “WAKE UP!” Two things at once, indeed.

II.

So, why stray today from the sugary sweetness of the holiday season with such a dark text? Well, perhaps the reason is this: if the church cannot proclaim and look forward to the second advent of Christ, then there is little that is merry and bright about his first advent in Bethlehem. If Jesus is not coming back to make all things new and restore what is broken, then our carols of joy and hope possess the same amount pop charm as Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas." Theologian Scott Hoezee writes, "The Christ of God did not arrive in this world long ago to help people be a little nicer, to encourage a few weeks' worth of charitable giving to the United Way or the local soup kitchen, or any other such short-term, local goal. No, the Christ of God came to make straight every crooked way, to right every wrong, to upend every injustice, and to reconcile all things to himself."<sup>i</sup>

We live every day with two things at once. We live with the troubles around us, and we live with the promises of God's beautiful future. Beginning Advent today, not with holiday hype but with the end in sight, helps us hold the honest reality about our weariness, anxieties, and brokenness in the present while also holding the promise of God's relentless love and ultimate victory over all things. Two things at once.

III.

Our passage today, which is a portion of what is often called "the little apocalypse," puts us in the presence of the adult Jesus offering both prophetic judgment and prophetic comfort. He speaks of a time when the heavens will shake and stars will fall out of the sky, followed by the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory, gathering his people from the ends of earth and the heavens. Perhaps those who assigned this text for the first Sunday of Advent were following the advice of epic movie director Cecil De Mille who said, "Start with an earthquake, then build to a climax."<sup>ii</sup> Before the climatic arrival of the Christ child on Christmas eve, we shake things up with a reminder of what is still to come.

Starting Advent with what has been promised yet not fulfilled helps us step into the sandals of those who awaited the birth of the Messiah long ago. For generations, they had heard of a promised Messiah, and they waited and waited. Amid their oppression, weariness, and uncertainty, they cried out to the Lord, as recorded in Isaiah saying, "Oh, that You would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Isaiah 64:1)

And God did. God came down in the form of an infant. Author Rachel Held Evans wrote, "The whole story of Advent is the story of how God can't be kept out. God is present. God is with us. God shows up—not with a parade but with a whimper of a baby, not among the powerful but among the marginalized, not to the demanding but to the humble."

We, too, like those of ancient days know what it is like to long and to wait. We know what it is like to see oppression and injustice all around us, to be weary of war and hatred and uncertainty, and ask, "Oh, that You, God, would tear open the heavens and come down again!"

We, of course, know what those early people of God did not – that the Messiah did come and that is what we celebrate in this season. But, like them, we now wait for a day and an hour that has been promised will come yet has not come. And we do not know when. Jesus says he himself does not know. “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.” (v. 32) But Jesus doesn’t seem to think knowing the hour or day is of importance. What is important is to keep awake.

Jesus tells a story about a fig tree which always makes me think of figgy pudding this time of year. You know, you’re supposed to bring me some figgy pudding and bring it out here, according to the song, *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. But please don’t. It honestly doesn’t sound that great. It is basically like a fruit cake that isn’t baked but rather shaped into a dome and boiled or steamed. Some pour a little brandy on it and set it on fire which sounds fun but not delicious. And by the way, there usually aren’t any figs in figgy pudding, but rather raisins and currants and a bunch of spices.

But Jesus wasn’t thinking of figgy pudding. He was thinking of fig trees, something the people of his day would be familiar with. Fig trees sprout and grow their leaves for what is a dreadfully long time compared to when their fruit is ripe for enjoyment. While the leaves are beautiful, what people want is the fruit. They must patiently watch the branches and leaves carefully in anticipation of the fruit. Go to sleep, and you just might miss it.

Jesus also tells the story of a master or owner leaving on a journey, placing his slaves in charge of the house and work, each tasked with their jobs to do. They don’t know when the owner will return, but they are commanded to be on watch and awake. It could be evening or midnight, or when the rooster crows or dawn breaks. You don’t know when, but he is coming back. And when he does, don’t be caught asleep. Keep awake.

III.

Each January, instead of New Year’s resolutions, I choose a word for the year to focus on. My word of the year in 2018 was “awake.” As an Enneagram 9, I love and seek peace. But sometimes, to be honest, I just seek calm, not real peace. When things are hard, I’m tempted to go to sleep emotionally and mentally, to choose the path of least resistance, to numb out and check out, to become like this toddler, a dead weight, refusing to move or be bothered by the world around me. But that isn’t how I want to live. I want to be awake to the good and the possibilities as well as the hard and the lessons they bring. I want to be alert to where God is at work in me and around me and always looking for where heaven is breaking through in the here and now. I don’t want to go through the motions until my time is up. I want to make the most of the moments until I’m welcomed home. I don’t know when that day or hour will be, but I do know I have this day and this hour. And I want to savor them as God intends for God’s children to do, and I want God to be pleased with how I invest them for God’s glory and the good of the world.

We wait, but not passively. We wait actively, with expectation. Like a child at the Christmas parade, standing at the corner of Capitol and Monroe, with a bag in hand to collect all the candy

thrown we hope is thrown, hearing the marching band in the distance, and seeing the glow of the lights from a far down Capitol Avenue. It is just out of sight, but it is coming. The parade is already happening, even though it is not yet before us in fullness. Two things at once.

The reign of God is already evident here, but not yet fully established. But we trust that because Christ has come, Christ will come again. This is the in-between we live in. Two things at once.

IV.

Jesus did not concern himself with the hour of his return. Nor should we. Stop with the end time predictions. His command was that we live as if his return were just around the corner. This command was not intended to cause us to live in fear, gathered in holy huddles or Christian bomb shelters declaring the sky is falling. His command should not lead us to wash our hands of this world and planet that we are charged with caring for. Instead, this command is to send us out in hope. We don't live in fear of his arrival, but in confidence of his arrival, awake to this truth. Those at the time of Christ's birth did not know the day had come, but it did. And one day the same will be true for us. Christ has come. Christ will come again.

Until then, Christ has put the work he began into our hands, and we are to not go to sleep in that work: the work of loving others, doing justice, and bringing others to a knowledge of God through our lives. It is our job to live justly and promote peace. It is our job to care for the earth. It is our job to be living witnesses of love and grace that inspire others to follow Jesus so they might be ready for his return, too.

The world is not as it should be, but God is still at work.

Ugliness is around and within us, but so is God's beauty.

People sleep on streets, but churches are opening their doors.

The Lord is with us, but the Lord is still coming. May we be awake and alert to see the Lord with us and join him in revealing the kingdom of God even while we wait. Two things at once.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-11-27/mark-1324-37/>

<sup>ii</sup> Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Volume 1. Edited by David Lyon Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor, 21.