

NOVEMBER 29, 2020 – FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS

Welcome to each one joining us for worship this morning! It's been a beautiful weekend to celebrate Thanksgiving as well as the first Sunday of Advent and although we've had to alter the ways we celebrate with not traveling, not gathering in large groups, bundling up and eating outdoors in some cases, we realize we still have so much to be thankful for. I want to take a moment to recognize, on this Thanksgiving weekend that although some of us have lived on this land for several generations, our people were not the first people to be here. We now live on the land that was first occupied by the Arapaho, the Cheyenne, the Comanche, the Kansa, the Kiowa, Osage, Pawnee and the Wichita. I invite us to remember, humbly, these peoples who came before us on these lands.

As is becoming "usual" for us, if you're comfortable now turning on your cameras so we can see one another, let's do that and take a moment to greet each other... It's good to see each one of you and know that we're worshipping together.

Let's take a few moments for Opportunities for Celebration and Service –

- I have an update to share with you about Ira Don Schroeder's graveside service. The service had been scheduled for Monday morning at 11:00 but as you may know Ira Don lived in CO and because it's the holiday weekend they've had a little trouble getting the documentation they need to bring his body across state lines. Please continue to keep John in your prayers as he works out the details. We'll keep you posted as the details are worked out for when the service will be.
- As some of you know, Merlin and Velma Hiebert had a fire yesterday afternoon on their yard. Their shop caught fire and they lost 60 years worth of tools and equipment. Fortunately no one was hurt and no other buildings were damaged.
- I've also been asked to let you know that Janice Voth (Delton's wife) will have surgery on Wednesday and will appreciate our prayers.
- Pastor Caleb has included a couple of questions this morning for us to reflect on as we listen to his message and we can use those questions, at least as starters, later as we respond to the sermon. I would encourage you to take a look at those at the bottom of the second page of your bulletin.
- Please remember to read the announcements that are listed in the bulletin – Ruth spends time each week including them because there's helpful info in them!

MORNING PRAYER

Provider God, we come to you this morning with grateful hearts. On this Thanksgiving weekend we acknowledge both feelings of gratitude for the many good gifts that we have as well as feelings of loss and sadness for not being able to travel and gather together as we traditionally do. We pray for Merlin and Velma as they process loss; loss of tools, some that

were several generations old, and equipment, loss of the shop and its contents. We are also grateful; grateful that no one was hurt and that no other buildings or property was damaged. Be with them and their family as they figure out how to move forward and what to do next. We are grateful for college and other students who have come home after their semester away; we pray for continued safety and good health for them and their family members. We thank you for the land. We acknowledge both feelings of connectedness and rootedness to the land on which we live and move, as well as feelings of, perhaps confusion, guilt, or a longing for justice to be served in ways that make clear that all people are valued and respected.

God, we pray for John Schroeder and his family at the sudden and unexpected death of their brother Ira Don. Grant them your comfort and peace as they reminisce and celebrate his life and also grieve his loss. Be with John, especially in the coming days as arrangements continue to be ironed out.

We pray for Janice Funk Voth as she prepares for surgery on Wednesday. Lord, give her peace and a sense of security and trust – in her surgeon and the other medical people who will work on her behalf, but mostly in you, God, that she is your beloved child and you will hold her in the hollow of your hand. We pray also for Gene Hastings and for Steve Banman as they face on-going struggles with cancer, the tests and treatments, the waiting in between and hoping for positive results. Give them patience and endurance in the coming days and weeks. Be also with Cindy and Sandy as they offer their support and care. Lord, be with others in our circles of family or friends who we know are struggling with health whether it's physical, emotional, mental, spiritual – we are complicated beings and all aspects of ourselves come together to make us whole and well. So we pray for your healing and mercy, that healing would come in whatever ways it may be needed.

We pray for those who continue to battle the covid-19 virus, whether those who are sick with it or those medical folks who are doing their best to bring ill people back to wellness. God, be with those who are exhausted, discouraged, struggling to maintain during these weeks and months of virus related disruption.

Be with those who don't have enough right now, those who are food insecure, those who are in danger of losing their jobs, or have already lost them and are in danger of losing their housing. O God, we pray for compassion and mercy to have the upper hand, for generosity and love to win the day and shine your light in the darkness.

We continue to pray for people around the world whose lives have been upended by disasters caused by nature and people – hurricanes in Central America, a typhoon in India, war and violence in many parts of the world, Lord let your light shine in the darkness. We pray for the work of MMN and MCC in various places around the world. Continue to bless the work of those folks. Give them sustenance and inspiration from your Holy Spirit; guide them with your wisdom.

Be with us now as we worship you through prayers, songs and thoughtful reflections. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

WATCHING FOR HOPE – PASTOR CALEB

MARK 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday of Advent – the season of waiting for the coming of the Christ child.

Advent links the way people before Jesus' day were waiting for the Messiah and the way that we still wait as Christians for Christ to come again. That's why this scripture reading from Mark that talks about the coming of Christ is part of the Advent readings in the church calendar.

The waiting idea of Advent doesn't exactly go along with our culture that hates to wait for anything. So mostly we see just one big long celebration of Christmas starting the day after Thanksgiving.

Put up all your decoration – (we got our thin tree set up behind the couch so that Josiah can't get to it). Do all your Black Friday shopping, make all your festive plans...

Only this year feels different. We need Advent to teach us to wait, while we wait for our lives to return to something that feels normal.

We experience a mental health toll from not being able to see others. We want to see faces behind all the masks. We want to be able to have grandparent hugs. We fear what is to come, especially those who work in hospitals.

On top of all that, I feel I keep hearing bad news. News of machine sheds and tool sheds burning to the ground. Two hurricanes went through Central America, and people from the neighborhood where I once lived in Honduras have still not returned to their homes after they had to quickly flee from rising waters.

This is a year with so many losses. We need some good news!

Mark 13 *is* good news, even though much of the chapter doesn't sound like it, especially when we are talking about the sun and moon being darkened and stars falling from the sky.

The good news is that God has yet to write the last chapter of the story. Though Jesus doesn't give us many specifics of what that looks like, Jesus tells us to watch carefully for his coming.

We watch carefully either when we fear something or when we anticipate something good and hopeful that we don't want to miss. There might be a mixture of both in Mark, but the emphasis is really one of hope.

Mark 13 is also one of the more confusing chapters of the Bible to read. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus' disciples remark how magnificent the temple and other public works in Jerusalem are. Jesus clearly predicts the destruction of the city and the temple – this happened historically in the year AD 70 after the Romans squashed an unsuccessful Jewish rebellion.

Jesus warned that people would be fooled by false Messiahs claiming to be leading a successful revolt against the Romans.

This isn't the way God's kingdom will come, Jesus warned. It won't work.

As the chapter goes on, Jesus seems to be talking about the end of history, when God will finally rescue faithful people and set things right after the mess humanity has made of things.

Exactly how this fall of Jerusalem connects with the end of history, or which verse is talking about which, have both been topics of plenty of scholarly debate.

I want to take a few minutes to back up in the biblical story, to give us some more context for Jesus' words in Mark 13. You see, this had happened once before. The Jerusalem temple was the *second* temple.

The first temple was also tragically destroyed centuries earlier by the Babylonians. The prophet Jeremiah was active in that time, about 600 years before Jesus. Jeremiah didn't have a popular message that people wanted to hear.

Basically, it was: the Babylonians are coming. God is not going to miraculously save the city. If you want to save your lives, leave the city and surrender to the Babylonians.

In Jeremiah 21:8-9, he says: *"See I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Those who stay in this city shall die...but those who go out and surrender to the [Babylonians] who are besieging you shall live..."*

As you can imagine, Jeremiah didn't sound very patriotic, and people accused him of being a traitor. He was thrown into prison and later into a cistern. Jeremiah himself would have preferred to keep quiet, but if he did, there was "something like burning fire" shut up in his bones, forcing him to speak.

The king ignored Jeremiah's warnings and staged an unsuccessful revolt, thinking that the kingdom would be saved by an alliance with Egypt. They did not want to accept reality.

Likewise, about 40 years after Jesus, Jewish nationalists were sick and tired of Roman rule, and thought they could lead an independence movement. They thought this was how God's kingdom would come. It didn't work.

In Mark 13:14-18, Jesus warns, *"...let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁵Let no one on the housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. ¹⁶Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. ¹⁷How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! ¹⁸Pray that this will not take place in winter."*

Though these words usually are understood to be about some kind of end-times tribulation, they make a lot of sense as we picture the Romans marching into the city to quell the rebellion.

I'll say a few unpopular things myself. During this pandemic we have seen the tragic results of believing in "American exceptionalism."

American exceptionalism is believing America doesn't have the limitations other countries have. We are the land of the free! We shouldn't have to change our plans or give things up. No one can make us wear masks!

We have the best health care system in the world – we can't imagine local and regional health systems facing critical shortages or staff burning out. That sounds like something from the developing world, not in our "advanced" society.

Yet just like people refused to listen to Jeremiah or Jesus, many in our country have refused to heed the warnings of epidemiologists and public health experts.

If we look at the biblical story with clear vision, we don't find blanket assurance that God magically fixes things or gets us out of trouble, especially when warnings are unheeded.

The thing we don't want to hear is this: we've got to stop saying the coronavirus is a natural disaster. We are past that. This is a *human-created* disaster. Many places in the world have also not done well, but some countries have demonstrated that it is possible to bring the pandemic under relative control.

As a society we are doing this to ourselves. We need to repent and take warnings seriously. I know these are hard words, especially as many of you listening very much have taken this seriously, have made sacrifices, and have experienced losses. We've also done our best to stay sane, and hopefully made principled decisions weighing risks as we try to also continue with life.

People in Jesus' day had a choice: they could encounter the God that Jesus proclaimed and embodied, as he healed the sick, befriended the outcast, taught enemy-love, and loved to the point of giving his life.

The other major choice was a temple-based Jewish nationalism that ultimately failed when the Romans sacked the city in AD 70.

Of course, the witness of scripture invites us to feel the same compassion for the trauma people of that time must have experienced. But it also reveals what God is *not* doing. How God's reign is *not* coming.

Biblical faith developed and flourished in the aftermath of the tragedy of both times that Jerusalem fell.

As Jesus predicted the tragedy of Jerusalem's fall, his disciples wanted to know when it would all happen. Jesus answered: you really don't know, so stay alert!

Then, as Jesus spoke to both the ultimate concerns of the fate of the city and God's coming reign, it's hard to know which is which.

CELESTIAL SIGNS

Our passage began with these words:

*"the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;*

*25 the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*

For comparison, consider Isaiah 30:10: *"...the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light."*

Talk of celestial objects darkening was common in the prophets. Biblical writers believed that major events on earth corresponded with something going on in the heavenly realm. When Jesus died on the cross, for example, the gospels tell us the sun became dark and there was an earthquake.

Recalling the story of Jeremiah helps me to understand Jesus a little better in Mark 13.

While Jeremiah had a pretty doom and gloom message before the tragic fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, Jeremiah also talked about hope. The hope in Jeremiah is about the return from Exile and the last days.

Jeremiah (and other prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah) didn't make a clear differentiation between the hopeful message of return from exile and the hopeful message of God's full reign in the last days.

Maybe it's because for all they knew, the two things would go together. We're in a different position, because we know the return from exile did happen historically, and likewise the destruction of Jerusalem the second time to the Romans happened historically, yet human history marches on.

God has been at work all along, offering a new way of life based on Love, cemented in the love-offering of Jesus.

We do not know when the End in the ultimate sense will be. That's Jesus' answer to his disciples' question loud and clear. Even though I don't think the End is upon us, it sure feels to us like 2020 is the year of the sun and moon going dark. Why not, when plenty else has collapsed?

Yet the love of God we know in Jesus has remained constant. Like the psalmist who says, "therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea," because "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."

The final point I want to make is about the command Jesus gives in this passage: Watch! Stay alert!

In verse 35 Jesus says: *"Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn."*

What Jesus has done is list the four watches of the night as the Romans divided it. Jesus' point about the watches of the night is clear enough – be prepared and stay awake through the night.

Most readers miss, though, that these same four watches of the night come up again in the Gospel story. Jesus' closest disciples failed to faithfully watch.

In the last 36 hours of Jesus' life, he ate the last supper with his disciples during the evening watch, while Judas left to betray him.

During the midnight watch, Jesus' desperately prayed in Gethsemane, while his disciples couldn't stay awake.

During the cockcrow watch, Peter denied Jesus three times. At dawn, Jesus was put on trial, while all his male disciples either fled or blended in with the crowds crying "crucify him!"

Naturally, we don't want to be like the disciples.

We want heed Jesus' words: we stay awake, stay alert, keep watch for signs of hope during the watches of the night.

CONCLUSION

This Advent give yourself permission to feel what you feel:

Maybe it's sadness at the way this year will feel different. Maybe it's fear or anger. Maybe it's a sense of joy at the blessings you have. Maybe that seems out of place, but it's not.

To whatever we carry in our hearts, let's add hope. Let's watch for signs of hope and watch for opportunities to be a channel of hope. Hope like its cousin gratitude isn't based on a denial of reality. We can call it what it is and still be hopeful.

We can pray prayers of protest, like many faithful biblical writers do, because these kinds of prayers only make sense when you have hope.

I see hope in the fact that our community has worked so hard to find ways to do school safely. The folks at Bethesda and other area care homes have worked so hard both to keep everyone healthy, and to care for morale and a sense of community in spite of this hard year.

I see hope our effective fire department response and in the way the crew quickly assembled to clean-up at Dwight M.'s place after the fire.

I see hope in the continued efforts of the MCC to make canned meat and kits available to vulnerable people whose need hasn't gone away.

I see hope in the way people are making the most of this strange year, making alternative plans to stay connected.

You all are keeping up with our myriad ways of doing church. We've probably had more experiments this year than the last couple decades.

Keep awake, stay hopeful!

Watch for opportunities to be channels of hope.

Christ is coming!

BENEDICTION

People of God, people on the road: keep alert; keep awake, watch!

May God strengthen you to the end, as you wait for the revealing of Jesus. May God's face shine upon you and restore you, that you may be saved.