

Regardless of what our church calendar may say, *culturally* the Christmas season begins about the time we sit down to leftover pumpkin pie for Black Friday breakfast. So it is jarring to come to church on the first Sunday of Advent—the season of preparation—expecting to hear scripture that anticipates the birth of 8 lb, 6 oz baby Jesus, but hearing instead about the Son of Man, coming in the clouds, after days of suffering, when the sun and moon grow dark and the stars fall from heaven. We begin the year and this season not with the coming of God in history but the coming of God in majesty. Our branch of the Christian family tree focuses less than some others do on the end times. We devote comparatively little time to these apocalyptic texts—just a few passages at the end of the year and beginning of Advent. So that may be why I’m usually taken a bit by surprise when someone says to me, “Pastor, do you think such and such event is pointing to Jesus’ return?” I’m never certain if that question assumes that seminary gave me an inside track on God’s timeline or is just commiseration about the state of the world. But generally, I would say that my answer is yes, many world events do point to the imminent need of Jesus’ return...but probably not any more so than at any other time in history.

The Christian church has always understood itself as existing in the end times. The book of Hebrews begins by saying: *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days—that is, final days, not latest or most recent—in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son.* The very earliest Christians anticipated the glorious return of Jesus within their lifetime, and you can see why: Jesus says, *Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place...* That certainly makes it sound like Jesus was hanging a “be right back” sign on the door and taking a very quick trip to heaven and back. But when generations did pass away without Jesus coming in the clouds, these scriptures began to be interpreted differently, as a future yet to occur—which is why some folks direct a lot of energy and effort into guessing whether certain world events fit these apocalyptic descriptions. Particularly for those who believe we need to contribute to our own salvation in some way, whether that is through baptism or “accepting Jesus” or repenting of something specific, reading those signs is important in order to accomplish whatever they believe we have to do before the deadline. But that’s not how apocalyptic literature was supposed to work. Apocalypse doesn’t mean *end of the world*; it means *hidden*. Apocalyptic writers used metaphor to speak about current events, to give people hope that however bleak their circumstances might be, God is still able to redeem the world for a better future.

So these strange signs did happen for Mark’s generation: during their lifetime, the Jews revolted and Rome destroyed the Temple; their world as they knew it did come to end. It would

have been the same for the British living through the Blitzkrieg in London. It would have been the same in Washington state when Mount St. Helens erupted. It would have been the same for medieval Europe living and dying through the Plague...or for the whole world in the spring of 2020. Perhaps not every generation feels like their world is ending, but neither is any generation alone in wondering, *How long, O Lord? Could this finally be the end?*

Jesus, frankly, gives us a bit of a mixed message: Like the fig tree growing leaves before summer, we should be able to tell, when we see these things happen, that the end is near. On the other hand, he also says, *But about that day or hour no one knows*, not the angels, not even him. So if we can tell we're in the end times, but we don't know when that final redemption is going to happen, what do we do? Because living in a constant state of vigilant anxiety is not good—it's not good for us, it's not good for our neighbors, and it's not good for our natural world. If we read these cosmic signs and are convinced that Jesus is coming back to fix it all for us next week, then we're not going to be very motivated to seek justice for the oppressed or to reach out in compassion to the suffering, or to care for the creation in which we live—all things that scripture calls us to do. So there must be a better way.

Jesus' parable of the man going on a journey teaches us to keep awake by living not in constant dread, despair, or apathy, but in hope. If the household is running the way the master expects it to run the whole time he is away, then all there is for the doorkeeper to do when the master returns is rejoice that he is coming home to find things the way he wants them. The master's return, even in the middle of the night, is only a problem if the household has devolved into chaos in his absence—like one of those movies where the parents leave for the weekend and their teenager throws a party that wrecks the house. Jesus' command to keep alert, for we don't know when the time will come, is not warning us to be anxious about getting caught unawares. It's teaching us not to make a Risky Business of our lives in the first place, so we don't feel like we need to make a 180 degree turn in life before God shows up and catches us.

In Advent we sing, O Come Emmanuel, which means *God with us*, and we prepare to celebrate Jesus coming in history—the baby in Bethlehem. We also anticipate Jesus coming in majesty—returning in glory as Mark describes here. But in the meantime, we also experience Jesus coming in everyday mystery—in the waters of baptism, in the bread and wine of communion, *and* living in all those we meet. We aren't just to keep awake for the future, but to keep awake every day to live as the master expects, because *he is already with us, now*.