

“Watching in the Darkness”

Sermon: Year B, Advent 1

Texts: Mark 13:24–37, Isaiah 64:1–9

Preached: December 3, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

When I was a teen, I worked in a chain drugstore called Eckerd’s...it was like Walgreen’s or CVS. I worked way up front in the store at the camera counter. The manager of the store was a guy named Jack Lane. And that was *Mister Lane* to the employees. No one ever dared call him Jack. Mr. Lane was a very intimidating guy, former Marine recently back from Vietnam, loud, big bushy mustache, and a stare that could freeze you in his tracks. His two favorite sayings were, “You got time to lean, you got time to clean” and “Shape up or ship out.” He had a particularly disturbing habit, which was to sneak up silently from behind an endcap and catch you in the act of goofing off or chatting with your fellow employees. And suddenly you would hear this booming voice saying, “Is this what we’re paying you for?” Many of the employees were terrified of him. The store had tilted mirrors all along the outer walls to keep down shoplifting, and so we would appoint someone to keep watch in the mirrors. The doors from the stockroom would swing open, and word would spread like wildfire through the store, so that by the time he got to the front of the building, we would all be busily straightening shelves or polishing the counter with Windex. You didn’t want to get caught by him.

Do any of you remember the book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*? It was published back in 1970, and it was the number 1 nonfiction seller of the decade on the New York Times bestseller list...by the end of the 1990s, it had sold 28 million copies. It was a book that purported to have figured out the secrets of scripture concerning the Second Coming of Jesus, looking at world events and the Bible side by side and making predictions about Jesus’ return. The book was full of apocalyptic imagery, dire warnings about the Soviet Union and its intention to invade Israel, etc., etc., and proposed that the 1980s most likely would be the end of the world as we know it. (Interestingly enough, subsequent editions have been subtly revised to gloss over the fact that Jesus had not, in fact, returned in 1986. Whoops.) The author’s interpretation of scripture was that Jesus will return suddenly in the skies, snatch up true believers and carry them off to heaven in what’s called the Rapture, and then leave everyone else behind to suffer terribly in seven years of a Great Tribulation, after which Jesus would return yet again to establish a thousand-year reign of peace and justice and punish all wrongdoers. And that then led to the *Left Behind* series, a Christian marketing marvel that has churned out 16 novels for adults and 40 for kids, and movies with actors like Nicolas Cage. All of it is built around people’s fears that they might get left behind when Jesus comes to take us all out of here. You just have to know how to read the signs, they say...while they read the dollar signs.

But the gist of this kind of thinking is Jesus as Mr. Lane, suddenly bursting out of the backroom to catch us doing wrong. I can remember reading some of those books, and others of that sort, when I was a teen, and being intensely worried about Jesus’ return. What if I got left behind? The return of Christ, the Second Coming, became for me something that filled me with dread, rather than with joy. I didn’t want to be left behind to go through the Great Tribulation. So Jesus becomes not a figure whose return we anticipate, but someone whose return we fear and dread, someone who’s trying to catch us so we can be punished.

You know, we proclaim week after week in the Eucharist, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” We affirm over and over again in the Creeds that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. That could sound like pretty terrifying stuff, no? So what is this Second Coming thing about? Is it ushering in a time of fear and trembling and dread?

Actually, if you look at scripture, the return of Christ is not ushering in the dire troubles of the world, it’s putting an end to them. In the passage from the Gospel of Mark that today’s reading is taken from, Jesus is describing for his disciples the very real suffering that is about to come on him, and on them, and on the earliest believers in Jesus. He’s not threatening them...he’s trying to encourage them. He’s not warning them to shape up or ship out, he’s telling them, “Hang on, keep hoping, keep looking, because I’m going to bring an end to the suffering. When everything seems to be trembling and shaking and falling apart, I’m going to come gather you all up.” It’s the same picture he painted earlier of a mother hen gathering her chicks up under her wings to protect and save.

Jesus says here that it's right in the middle of misery and suffering that the Master is going to return and set things back in order. It's in the darkest point of despair that God's power will be revealed. And if you look closely, you can see that he wasn't necessarily talking about the end of time. He was also talking about events that were just about to happen. He speaks of the Master showing up in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, at dawn. And just a few days later, he will gather with his disciples in the evening, and share a meal with them, and urge them to stay awake. At midnight, he will pray in agony in the garden after begging his disciples to keep awake. At cockcrow, he will be denied by his closest friend and handed over to death on the cross. And at dawn on the third day, he will be raised from death. The coming of God among us happens in a hidden way that we don't always understand. God comes among us in the darkest places in our lives, not to catch us out, but to be with us in the darkness. Jesus urges us to stay awake and look for the signs of the Master's presence.

We live in a troubled and trying world. We can easily become numb to the suffering that we see around us, or the suffering that we ourselves go through. It's easy to grow tired of waiting for God to come and set things right. We look at the turmoil and violence around us, we look at how the powerful seem to triumph over the weak, we see injustice and hatred and evil, and we cry out, "How long, O Lord, how long?" We long for a sudden reckoning, a dramatic and impressive end to it all. Or we stop thinking that there *will* be an end to the suffering of this world. And in doing so, we overlook something very important: We have a God who keeps showing up in the unexpected places, in the difficult places, a God who is revealed to us not in pomp and circumstance, but in those quiet signs of the breaking in of God's reign.

Jesus points out to us that the terrible things we see around us are like the wrenching pangs of giving birth. In the middle of barrenness, he urges, look for the signs of life...just as, if you look closely, the barren branch of a fig in winter already bears within it the life that will surge forth in summer. We are called to be a people who proclaim in the midst of this world's troubles that God is present with us, working to give birth to something new, working to bring an end to the warfare, to the racial injustice, to the poverty, to the hunger, to the violence. Ours is a God who is present and working among us...but we need eyes to see that God is there, that God's power is at work, that we do not need to despair. And God gives to each of us our tasks to do while we're waiting for the full redemption and liberation of all of creation. We can't grow weary in working for God's good Reign. We ourselves become signs of new life, signs that summer is soon bursting forth. It's already here...and still, it's not yet. It's both things at the same time. As Madeleine L'Engle said, "Some things have to be believed to be seen."

I want to end with a prayer from the Iona Community that reminds us of how God comes to us in that hidden way, comes to us in the now and in the not yet:

"When the world was dark, and the city was quiet, you came. You crept in beside us. And no one knew. Only the few who dared to believe that God might do something different. Will you do the same this Christmas, Lord? Will you come into the darkness of tonight's world; not the friendly darkness as when sleep rescues us from tiredness, but the fearful darkness in which people have stopped believing that war will end or that food will come, or that a government will change or that the Church cares? Will you come into that darkness and do something different to save your people from death and despair? Will you come into the quietness of this town, not the friendly quietness as when lovers hold hands, but the fearful silence when the phone has not rung, the letter has not come, the friendly voice no longer speaks, the doctor's face says it all? Will you come into that darkness and do something different, not to distract, but to embrace your people? And will you come into the dark corners and quiet places of our lives? We ask this not because we are guilt-ridden or want to be, but because the fullness our lives long for depends upon us being as open and vulnerable to you as you were to us, when you came, wearing no more than nappies, and trusting human hands to hold their maker. Will you come into our lives, if we open them to you and do something different? When the world was dark and the city was quiet you came. You crept in beside us. Do the same this Christmas, Lord. Do the same this Christmas." *

AMEN

[From *Cloth for the Cradle*, Wild Goose Worship Group, pp. 92-93]