



Sunday November 29, 2020  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

Pastor Chris Marien  
Mark 13:24-37

It seems to me that this reading from Mark 13 on this first Sunday of Advent is the cherry on the top of the Ice Cream Sunday that is 2020: *“The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”* Are you kidding? And, of course, These should be the words of hope waiting to greet us on this First Sunday of Advent as 2020 keeps a tight grip on our lives. I know I am being a little bit sarcastic – but if ever there was a First Sunday of Advent reading to keep pushing us down the road of challenge that has been 2020 – it is this reading from the book of Mark...leading us to expect the Son of God coming on the clouds – no longer the lamb of God but now coming as the Lion of Judah – in power and majesty – with judgment and command. And the last words of this hope-filled reading from Mark – KEEP AWAKE! Are you serious God? Have you been watching 2020 unfold? None of us dare close our eyes for even a minute – we are too afraid for what might come next? Not sure you are aware God – but perhaps a little update from those of us who are currently keeping both eyes open and focused on the horizon for what may come barreling towards us.

So a pandemic hit in early March. It has been a roller coaster of joy – masks, no masks, events planned, events canceled, vacations scheduled, vacations canceled, 25% capacity in restaurants, no capacity in restaurants, toilet paper hoarding, Lysol wipes ran out, we were being price-gouged for hand sanitizer and well, isolation became the new social scene. I have not seen a pair of dress pants in months – except for a really bright spot – when someone I loved died from a stroke. And then there was a true moment of joy at an ordination in August where I wore all my pastoral finest but still shorts underneath my robe because again, we were outside in the humidity of Wisconsin in August. We gathered for worship outside when it was really hot and when it was really cold. The hands of the musicians were the colors of candy canes way before it was time to celebrate anything with candy canes. And finally, in a moment of pure beauty – I shared communion with 180 of my closest friends and baptized three babies, not knowing all along, I was also fairly contagious but asymptomatic as I boarded the train for Coronaville and two long weeks of recovery. I have prayed with spouses, sons, siblings of so many have struggled with the coronavirus among other moments of illness. I have led worship at gravesides and celebrated marriages all the while wondering when a vaccine would be readily available. I have prayed for a community of faith that it would stay strong and connected even as we have been disconnected – only beginning to come to terms with the absolute importance of every conversation, every phone call, every text message, every newsletter article, every e-alert, and every recorded worship moment offered via the internet. Oh, and to provide an extra layer of rum in the fruitcake of crazy, we watched a black man die on a national television, peeling back yet another layer of suffering for people of color everywhere. So you will forgive me, holy God, if I am struggling to find the message of hope in this reading. I have kept awake – honestly, I have barely slept. And I might be far more ready for your return than I ever thought I would be as the journey of 2020 can truly go jump-in-the-lake. Wow, that felt good. I think I have been holding on to all of that far longer than I should have. And that my friends may be the message of hope for us this day.

To wake up to the world as we have lived these past nine months and also to wake up to the hope that is coming in our Savior Jesus in the days of ahead as this journey of Advent begins to unfold for us. I have much to be grateful for in this life as the story of Advent begins again this day. As we are just days past Thanksgiving – I thought it would be appropriate to list what I am grateful for that will lead me into Advent hand-in-hand with what has been a struggle in 2020. I am grateful for the gift of family that comes in the extended time at home with three children and a spouse who is more forgiving than most. I am grateful for to have my dad close enough to see daily and hug just as often as we are learning to adjust to the absence of my mom. I am grateful for a community of faith that has continued to show up in the world – tending the needs of those in our community and our neighbors across the street and our brothers and sisters across the state and beyond our borders. I am grateful for tears and smiles and words of promise spoken to me when I needed them most. I am grateful to hear myself praying to God for those who are desperate for healing and relationship. I am grateful for

church leaders who partner and support and lead with wisdom and faithfulness. I am grateful for members of our church staff who serve God and the Ascension community with dedication, love, and joy even in their midst of their own concerns and struggles. Mostly, I am grateful to know that I am not alone – that when I get sleepy and want to close my eyes to the problems of the world – sisters and brothers in the faith who help to keep me awake. Some buy me Meru coffee. Some buy me Starbucks gift cards. Some drive me to Starbucks – with masks on, of course. And some tell me that I am loved and not to give up. And that, my friends, may be the good news of God’s promised hope that I need the most. So, my friends, wherever you are; however you are doing, right now, in this moment – keep awake!

And if you need some help staying awake, in these early days of Advent, let the world know – I promise God is also awake and keeping track of every single one of us – until the day we can all gather together again to the great glory of God. May these Advent days breathe peace deeply into your spirit and hope deeper still into the very depths of your soul. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus. Amen.