



Mark 13:24-37 – And Hope Does Not Disappoint

First Sunday in Advent
3 December 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ, the one who has come, the one who comes to us, and the one who will come again. Amen.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God. You hold us in our waiting and keep us awake to the world. You show up in our lives at unexpected times. Bless us with hope, as we light this candle to keep watch for your arrival.

It seems fitting to remind you of the words that began our worship today, because after the reading from Mark – suffering, darkened sun, stars falling from heaven, and even the powers in the heavens being shaken, we need a little hope, especially when the world is coming to an end and Jesus is about to return. We, followers of Jesus often forget, even more so for Christians of a Lutheran flavor, who tend to lean towards more of the work entrusted to us now than seek out the horizon searching for the return of our Savior, that our hope is grounded in the return of our Savior.

Look, the world is always ending somewhere. (Just ask any three-year-old who cannot have a cookie before dinner or any fourteen-year-old who has been asked to put away the clean dishes from the dishwasher.)

Somewhere the sun has come crashing down.

Somewhere it has gone out completely.

Somewhere it has ended - with the gun, the knife, the fist.

Somewhere it has ended with a slammed door - the shattered hope.

Somewhere it has ended with the utter quiet that follows the news from the phone, the television, the hospital room.

Somewhere it has ended with a tenderness that will break your heart.

I am most keenly aware of world-ending moments when I stand by hospital beds. When I hold hands with someone who is expecting, waiting, for the last breath of someone they love. It seems to me, that God spends more time in the ICU than anywhere else in the hospital. It is where your pastors are most often called to be present as we prepare to remove someone from life support and invite family and friends to give permission for the one, we love to go home to God. If you have been to a funeral here at Ascension, you often hear these words spoken before we commend someone back to God. *Child of God, our sister/brother* in the faith, we entrust you to God who created you. May you return to the one who formed us out of the dust of the earth. Surrounded by the angels and triumphant saints, may Christ come to meet you as you go forth from this life. Christ, the Lord of glory, who was crucified for you, bring you freedom and peace. Christ, the High Priest, who has forgiven all your sins, keep you among his people. Christ, the Son of God, who died for you, show you the glories of his eternal kingdom. Christ, the Good Shepherd, enfold you with his tender care. May you see your redeemer face to face and rejoice in God's presence forever.

I have been asked more than once why we use those words at the funeral, when they are more appropriately used when someone is dying, not after they have died. My answer is always the same. The words carry power not just for the one about to be ushered into the throne room of God, but the words carry power for each of us who keep watch – who wait – who are desperately trying to hold on to the promise of resurrection joy as our tears burn down our faces at the bedside and again at the graveside.

The beautiful truth of the Christmas story is that we, like Mary, are called to carry and deliver Christ to a hurting and broken world. Our very lives are pregnant with this incredible goodness just waiting to be born. Not just in these days of Advent, but in every, suffering, darkened sun, stars falling from heaven ending days of this life we live.

Last week, I went to Mama Ds coffee shop, I know, I know-was Starbucks closed? Every so often I do branch out. I ordered my drink and waited for my drink to be called. While I waited, I scanned my email, and held the door for a woman whose hands were full. I chatted with the woman for a minute and returned to my



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email. When my drink was called, I walked up to the counter and thanked the young woman and told her to have a good day. No sooner had I finished my sentence and I heard someone say, “wait, I know that voice.” And before I looked up from my coffee, I, too, knew the source and sound of the other voice. My son had snuck in the other door and was waiting to place his order. Now, of course, my first thought was something to the idea of “why is my senior in high school cutting his second hour class?” But before that came out of my mouth, my son walked over with a smile. I still asked him about his second hour, forgetting he has a release period, but the surprise of seeing him and the smile on his face as he walked towards me brought such a sense of hope, a moment of joy to my heart, I could hardly be mad if he was cutting class.

I am often a person who carries a sense of joy and hope with me, most of the time. Sometimes my hope is loud. Sometimes my joy may even be annoying. Ask Pastor Tony or Pastor Edwin or poor Amy and Tamie in the office who have no doors to close when I am too much. Of course, there are other days. When I am hungry for someone else to share their joy with me. There are days when the well runs dry – days when the shadows crowd out much of the light – days when I need the hope of another to shine light into my darkness. Luckily. Gratefully. Hope does not disappoint.

I wonder if this first Sunday of Advent, brings challenge to our faith so that we might be reminded to wait, to watch, to keep awake, and to carry the hope of Christ into our broken world. Is it possible that these words from Mark come not as a warning but as invitation? Is it possible these words do not come to cause despair but come as blessing? A blessing simply because there is nothing a blessing is better suited for than an ending, nothing that cries out more for a blessing than when a world is falling apart. This blessing will not fix you, will not mend you, will not give you false comfort; it will not talk to you about one door opening when another one closes. It will simply sit itself beside you among the shards and gently turn your face toward the direction from which the light will come, gathering itself about you as, the baby in a manger promises us, the world begins again.

Dear friends: A candle burns, the first marker of our Advent journey.

People of God, blessed are you:

who bear the light in unbearable times,

who testify to its endurance amid the unendurable,

who bear witness to its presence when everything seems in shadow and grief.

Blessed are you:

in whom the light lives,

in whom the brightness blazes – your heart a chapel.

an altar where in the deepest night can be seen the fire that shines forth in you:

in unaccountable faith,

in stubborn hope,

in love that illumines every broken thing it finds.

As we set out, may we travel hopefully.

As we set out, God of journeys, travel with us. Amen.