

Today’s Gospel lesson is part of the cosmic sweep of creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and coming again in glory. This is Jesus’ final teaching opportunity before the fatal events of Passion Week, a last chance to make an indelible impression. He is seated, on a hill, as great teachers often were, teaching his closest followers, the Twelve. In the background is the Temple, proud symbol of the Jewish faith. His followers attend to his every word. Jesus prophesies of the Judgment Day when “the stars will fall from the sky.” Then with his listeners’ heads tilted heavenward, Jesus diverts their attention to a budding branch. “Now learn a lesson from the fig tree,” he counsels. “When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, summer is near.” That is, in the budding of a mulberry-fig, the hand of God makes all things new. From the celestial to the botanical, from the Day of Judgment to our next breath, God’s narrative is a cosmic sweep, continually revealed even by science. Each of us is formed of the dust of exploding stars. Each of us buds and blooms and dies. Each of us is participating in God’s kingdom, right here and now. Each of us is destined for eternal life in God’s very presence. We have roles to play in the present-tense of God’s infinite past and infinite future. Advent is the annual nexus of the temporal with the eternal. Advent marks the turn of the scriptural calendar. We begin this new year in Mark’s gospel.

Mark is that spare sketch of a gospel that leaves an impression: Indelible Mark. Compared with the more elaborate narratives of Matthew or Luke, Mark is a tougher cut of meat. We have to chew on it more slowly to savor its delights. Reading Mark is a two-course meal. First we are served the waters of Jesus’ baptism. Then suddenly (Mark’s favorite adverb), we’re standing outside Jesus’ empty tomb. Today’s lesson is part of that second course, just before Jesus goes on trial. Addressing what for the Twelve is an unpredictable future, Jesus draws an analogy between his situation and the owner of an estate going on a journey who must entrust his life’s work to his servants to carry on. Even the master does not know how long the journey will take. The good news – the only good news – in that is that the master will return. “Be on the watch. “Keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come – in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn.” What his listeners cannot possibly know is that this sequence of watches of the night prefigures events of the Passion of Jesus. It begins with a Passover meal in the evening, leads to the garden of betrayal at midnight, the denial of Jesus by his star pupil at cockcrow, and his trial at dawn. Jesus warns that his followers can expect the same hostile forces. Followers of Jesus are aliens in their native lands.

They are always viewed with suspicion by a world that seeks to remove God from the center of public attention. The faithful in Christ dwell at the edges. Our day of salvation is now-but-not-yet, frustratingly ambiguous. Advent is like that – we want assurances, now. Engaging the season of Advent reminds me of an episode of the old medical show *House*. A patient is told that he will die of cancer in a month. The diagnosis leaves an Indelible Mark on his spirit. He sells his property and spends all his money checking items off his bucket list. But the diagnosis is wrong. Now the patient is told he has a kind of cancer that can be treated successfully. But far from being overjoyed, the patient is furious. In his mind, he has nothing left to live for – not to mention nothing to live on. With no future story, his present is dislocated. Just so, Advent forces us to rethink possible futures. This patient exhibits little tolerance for ambiguity. He does not want to hear probabilities of survival or likelihoods of alternative causes. He wants one completely right answer, on which he can base his response. Ambiguity is the state of knowing a little bit, but not knowing for sure. Ambiguous things are open to various interpretations or seem to have more than one meaning. In a sense, ambiguous is the opposite of indelible. Psychologist Karen Horney once formulated the ingredients for positive mental health. At the top of her mental-health checklist is the ability to *tolerate ambiguity*.

To fully enjoy life, we have to be able to adapt to life’s contradictions, interruptions, disappointments, frustrations, risks, and the sheer nonsense sometimes of daily life. Though she is an empirical scientist, Horney makes a case for the need to have a *faith* elastic enough to stretch around life’s uncertainties. For example, a congregation calls a new pastor without knowing all the facts. They act in faith. A newly-called pastor has to pull up stakes without knowing all the facts. He acts in faith. Life keeps calling us to make most decisions without knowing all the facts. (Think ahead to the story of King Herod guessing which child the wise men seek.) We pray that God will reduce our ambiguity. That’s perfectly fine except that in praying we cannot presume to know God’s mind. Our lesson advises against that presumption: “About that day or hour, no one knows, but only the Father. Beware. Keep alert.” Jesus’ birth happened unawares. God’s people did not expect their savior, their Messiah, to enter the world as a newborn. They expected Messiah to burst on the scene like a conquering warrior, frightening the enemies of Israel. In Mark, when the adult Jesus makes his first public appearance, it’s anything but indelible: he looks like every other common peasant coming to the river to be baptized by John. Yet this is God’s Promised One, the Messiah. That’s the improbable future-story Jesus reveals, there on the hilltop with his disciples. It’s his apocalypse, the revelation of his future dying, rising, and returning -- altogether unbelievable to his companions –

yet tantalizingly close to the imagined Messiah,
 "in clouds with great power and glory."
 Before today's lesson, Jesus speaks even more vividly
 of what the Day of Judgment
 will be like for his followers.

Verse 8: "For nation will rise against nation,
 and kingdom against kingdom;
 there will be earthquakes in various places;
 there will be famines.
 "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."
 "As for yourselves, beware (verse 9),
 for they will hand you over to councils;
 and you will be beaten in synagogues;
 and you will stand before governors and kings
 because of me . . ."

We must remember that apocalyptic rhetoric
 is imaginative – meant to be evocative
 rather than predictive.
 (No apocalypse in the Bible has yet come true.)
 Apocalyptic rhetoric resists flat readings,
 "what you hear is what you get."

It calls for tolerance of ambiguity on a cosmic scale.
 Verse 32 is our cue that Jesus is trying to convey
 an idea that resists verification.

"About that day or hour, no one knows,
 but only the Father. Beware. Keep alert."
 Only God knows the future-story of the cosmos.
 Perhaps the only thing we know for sure
 about the coming Day of Judgment
 is that when we think know when it's coming,
 for sure it will not be then.
 We are all, Jesus analogizes,
 like servants whose master has gone on a journey.
 We do not know when, only that he shall return.
 We are admonished, twice, simply to
 "Keep awake. Keep awake."

The Master is still away on the long journey.
 You and I, for our brief spans on earth,
 Ocean View Presbyterian Church

are the servants in charge of the household.
 Jesus has given each of us instructions
 about the work we are to do.
 And he has asked that the gatekeeper
 watch for his return. The church is gatekeeper.
 This is not a passive activity.
 Watching does not mean retreating
 into personal holy-zones to get right with Jesus.
 Jesus orders us as disciples, working from the edges,
 to be active in the world.

We must remain alert to everything in the world
 that works against the Kingdom of God.
 We must wait by doing what Jesus did –
 loving our neighbor, pursuing justice,
 promoting peace.

We must witness for Christ in a world
 that for the most part has rejected him,
 or never knew him.

Active witness is the overarching theme
 of the whole Advent season.

Advent is not a time of passive waiting.
 It is a time to actively bring an end to suffering,
 so that all might be ready and able
 to celebrate a new leaf, a new beginning.

We are to leave an Indelible Mark.
 It is a time to bring a future story of hope
 to those who seem to have no future.

Advent can be an intensely personal
 faith experience.

It awakens a childlike faith that Jesus is coming
 just to see us, personally.

In the rhythms of the church's liturgy,
 such as the lighting of candles
 on the Advent wreath,
 we open our eyes once again
 to the Wonder of the Christ.

In that sense,

Advent can be a renewing time for our faith.

Let us beware, though:

Advent taps into our modern cultural weakness,
our tendency toward a strictly private faith-life –
for example, the tendency to be spiritual,
but not religious; Christian but not churched.

As a wise person once observed,
faith is always personal – but never private.

In this season, we recall the words
of a second-century theologian
whose vision of redemption was also cosmic.

For Irenæus, Christ our Savior is the one
who gathers together
the sordid struggles of human history
and the groaning of creation itself,
transforming and renewing the universe
in his very person.

In Christ, God with Us,
we can see that there is no separation
between our personal stories
and the history of the universe.

For in Christ, God is all in all,
and we become participants
in the life God gives to the world.

Amen.