

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:3-9

Advent 1B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

What an extraordinary thing to hear on this first Sunday of Advent. Why on earth would the Gospel writer tell us that we do not know the day or the hour when the Son of God will come. We know exactly when he'll come, don't we? In fact we even know where he'll arrive. The Son of God, the baby Jesus, will arrive in the stable in Bethlehem, on December 25th.....right?

Our Advent scripture readings surprise me every year. Just when it's beginning to look and sound and feel a lot like Christmas, these readings don't seem very, well, Christmasy. They actually seem other worldly, apocalyptic even, and in the midst of all of the chaos and darkness in our world right now, I can tell you that I would really prefer to hear the angel Gabriel announce to Mary that she is about to become the mother of God so that we can live happily ever after with the sweet baby Jesus

I long for a return to the peace and calm and assuredness of mother Mary saying “Let it be unto me according to your word”. And I am so ready to hear that baby Jesus is about to be born and that it's time for all of us to turn inward so that every heart can begin to prepare him room. But that simply isn't what we get on this first Sunday of Advent. Here, on this very first day of a brand new Christian year, on this very first day of our seventh year together, the Holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ tells us it's the end of the world as we know it. Listen...

*the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken
and we will see the Son of Man
coming in the clouds...*

That is a such a different image from the serene and beautiful young Madonna with her babe wrapped in snowy white swaddling cloth, both of them glowing with that mysterious Carravaggio-like light that seems to come from the inside out. Quite the contrary... the sun goes black, the

moon goes dark - even the stars begin to disappear, one by one. And yet, in the midst of all of this chaos and darkness, especially in the midst of all of this chaos and darkness, God comes. God comes.

It's tempting to hear this "little apocalypse" in Mark's gospel and to get ourselves fixated on the Second Coming, thereby conveniently relegating this scripture to a future that isn't here yet, that's hard to wrap our minds or hearts around and consequently doesn't really seem to ask anything of us. But I think there is an explicit invitation to action from Jesus in this scripture. Rather than considering the abstract notion of a distant, unknowable future, I think Jesus is inviting us to grasp the reality that is right before us in the here and now: the God who comes, who is always coming, into our lives and into our stories, comes to renew and empower and transform. I think what Jesus is trying to say to us is that we become most alive when our lives become more Christ-like... when we join with God in loving the world back to wholeness, when, instead of fixing our sights on some distant and unknown future Second Coming, we fix our sights on the next coming. And the next coming. And the one after that. God is always coming.

Where do you see God coming? This is the Advent question, a question that invites us into the active and unwavering expectation that God is going to show up around every single corner we turn. The God who created the world out of chaos, who made a raggedy bunch of grumblers in the desert into God's very own people, the God who began the Church with a little band of terrified disciples in an upper room, the God who turned death into life... this is the God who is always coming, always creating, always making things new. Do you know the first words in the Bible? *In the beginning, God created...* And in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, do you know what God says? *Behold, I make all things new.* After so much long history, for now and until the very end of time, God is making all things new, because that's what God does. That's who our creator God is, the one who is always making everything new.

There is a problem with God always coming and always making everything new, and that problem is that most of us tend to get pretty comfortable with the way things are. And when things are being made new, it can feel pretty uncomfortable. I can think of one hundred examples of that for myself in this very moment, because for me, it really does feel like God is making everything new. A new year, a new music director, a new family ministries person to hire, a new parish administrator, soon a new sexton, a new vestry, a new strategic plan, a new knee, and even some of you - new people whose stories I don't yet know. God is making all things new and while that can all be very exciting and wonderful, we wonder, What does this mean for us? Where is God taking us? What if we like the way things are. What if we don't want all things to be new?

That's a very natural, and quite frankly, very biblical response. When God called Samuel, Samuel said *"Who, me? Not me. I'm just a boy."* When God called Moses, Moses said *"Not me, I*

stutter.” And when the Lord God said to Abram “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.*” Can you imagine what he must have been thinking? What? Just leave? Leave family, home, and country? To go where? I will show you, says God. And I will be with you.

Now thankfully God doesn’t ask of most of us what God asked of Abram or Moses or even Samuel. Most of us aren’t being called to leave our homes and our families and our countries... and yet we can be assured that we are in fact being called into something new. God is calling every single one of us into new ways of loving and being, AND God is calling our community into new ways of loving and serving. Because, you see, the God who is always coming to us is the same God who is always calling us to come. Calling us out of the comfortable and certain places into God’s future of – well, we don’t know exactly what future God is calling us in to. But we do know God’s future demands lives lived out in justice and mercy and love.

That all sounds sort of hard. And not very comfortable. But I will tell you, if I’ve learned anything in my years at St Barnabas, it is that things are pretty much never comfortable. We preachers have a saying that our job isn’t just to comfort the afflicted, it’s also to afflict the comfortable... which always includes ourselves. Jesus didn’t promise us comfort. In fact, he spent a lot of time explaining how hard things can be, because that’s how it is when you stand against the powers that privilege some over others, that care for some and not others, that dignify some and not others. But ours is the God who promises always to be with us and in us as we show the face of Christ, the face of love in the world. God’s promise to be with us is something we want to be mindful of always, but especially as we make our journey through Advent in this very special time of watching and waiting, longing and hoping, stillness and great expectation.

St Barnabas is a community that knows a lot about watching and waiting and great expectations. We spent months watching and waiting for Sheila. We’re now watching and waiting for our new Parish Administrator. The strategic planning team is watching and waiting for the most fruitful strategies to rise to the surface. We’re watching and waiting for our new Family Ministries Coordinator. The Finance Team is watching and waiting for everyone’s financial participation in our collective life. Yes, there is a lot of watching and waiting, but none of it is passive. We are a community of deeply faithful and committed people who actively seek God’s guidance, working and waiting with great expectation for the movement of God’s Holy Spirit to show us the way into God’s future. Advent invites us into a deeper listening, deeper reflection, deeper discernment, even as the stars fall from the sky, even as the world we’ve known grows more and more distant. Advent reminds us that God is right here with us, making all things new.

And so, on this very first day of a new Christian year, on this very first day of our seventh year together, old worlds are ending, God is making all things new, and we are coming to understand that we are the way God will do that. You won’t want to miss this time set apart to watch and to

wait with great expectation for the God who is always coming, who is always calling, the God who has promised to be with us always.

How will you keep watch? Where will you look for the One who is always coming? I could give you a list of the usual suspects: this community of God's friends, your neighbor, the stranger, everyone in need, the saint, the enemy, the sunrise, the first star of the evening, the winter birds and of course your own heart. But since God likes to come as a surprise, perhaps it is best just to watch and wait without knowing exactly how or when or where or with whom. Be curious. Be present. Pay attention. Stay awake! Set your mind and heart on recognizing the presence of the holy all around you. Steep yourselves in these Advent days and receive the great gift that they are. Amen