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11/29/20—University Presbyterian Church
Mark 13:24-37

COME, LORD JESUS!

It was early March of this year when my son called to tell us that his university in Chicago had made the decision to close because of the coronavirus. Looking back on that time now, I can see how naïve we were about the situation, because I remember saying to him on the phone, “Oh, I hope they aren’t being too hasty in making this decision.” It seemed like such a radical step to take. Tim and I drove to Chicago to pick him and we loaded the van with all his belongings. He hugged his friends goodbye—there was no mask wearing or social distancing guidelines at that time—and then we set off on the long drive back to Buffalo. While we were disappointed for the disruption to his semester, our overall mood was lighthearted. But I remember that as we were driving through the state of Ohio, we heard a news report on the radio that the governor of Ohio had just closed all restaurants, bars, and non-essential businesses in the state. And sure enough, at the highway service stations, we saw employees roping off the seating areas. And suddenly the gravity of the situation really hit us. A feeling descended upon us, a feeling maybe you felt in those early days of the pandemic as schools and businesses closed, as hospitals were swamped with patients and the death numbers rose to staggering levels, as our city streets lay emptied of cars and pedestrians. It was a feeling that something apocalyptic was taking place.

The word *apocalypse* means “to reveal” or “to disclose” and it is most often used in describing the unveiling of the final conflict between good and evil. The idea of the apocalypse is frightening to us because it is usually associated with death and destruction and the violent end

of the world. So, it may come as a surprise to know that the gospel writer of Mark wrote to a community that thought of the apocalypse as *good news!* These early followers of Jesus were enduring a time of such great suffering and tribulation that for them, the idea of Christ's coming again to bring about the end of the existing world was something they longed for.

Mark wrote his gospel around the time of the Jewish uprising in 66-70 AD when a faction of the Jewish people rose up in revolt against the Roman occupation. This was a time of tremendous suffering when the Jewish people were fighting not only their Roman oppressors but also one another as some Jewish people resisted the rebellion. At one point, as the Roman armies were amassed around Jerusalem's walls, holding the city under siege, a group of the Jewish rebels tried to force the Jewish resisters to join their side by burning the city's entire stockpile of food in an effort to eliminate any kind of "security blanket." Mass starvation followed. When the Romans finally breached the walls, the soldiers unleashed a rampage of violence and destruction, slaughtering thousands and burning buildings, including the Jewish Temple which was believed to be God's holy dwelling place on earth. It is estimated that more than 1 million Jewish people died in the revolt or its aftermath.

This story of tremendous trauma forms the subtext of Mark's gospel. What we realize, then, is that the unsettling apocalyptic words we read today from Mark chapter 13 describe not just some far off future apocalypse, but describe the present day apocalypse the early followers of Jesus were already experiencing. The end of the world as they knew it had already taken place!

So Mark's community found hope in the idea that God would not overlook their pain and suffering. They found hope in the idea that Christ would come again and right the wrongs of this

world. For Mark's community, the apocalypse was both a present time of suffering as well as a greatly anticipated moment of divine redemption of a world that was broken.

Real time apocalypses happen in our world today. Covid-19 is a real time apocalypse that has brought about the end of the world as we knew it and created great suffering and hardships and death. Real time apocalypses happen when raging wildfires incinerate entire communities and when hurricanes and tornadoes level businesses and homes. We hear about real time apocalypses nearly every evening on the news: of airplane crashes, and oil spills, and refugees drowning on the seas.

What world-ending apocalypses have you experienced in your life? Was it when your spouse served you with divorce papers? Or when the doctor delivered a frightening diagnosis? Did the world as you knew it end when you were laid off from your job, or when your parents kicked you out of the house after learning you were gay or transgendered?

In such moments when we endure or witness such tragedies, we want a very big God who can do very big things. We want a God who will intervene in our broken lives and world and make right what is wrong. That feeling is precisely what lies behind biblical apocalyptic writings: the desire for God to intervene in all this brokenness in order to make right what is wrong.

We hear the prophet Isaiah express these very sentiments in the passage we read today. Isaiah cries out to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" Isaiah wants God to stop hiding and to come down to our broken world and intervene in the injustices and sufferings in a decisive way. I'll bet you have prayed a similar prayer to God at some point in your life. Maybe when watching a particularly upsetting story on the evening news, or when sitting beside the bed of a seriously ill loved one, or when your child is caught in the grip of

addiction, or when you are faced with your own unhealthy behaviors, you have prayed such a prayer: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” This is a prayer for help, a prayer for healing, a prayer for action. Such a prayer is a recognition that our outward lives as well as our inner lives are in drastic need of reordering. So we direct our prayers to our really big God who can do really big things.

Advent is a season when we offer our heartfelt prayers of longing for God to tear open the heavens and come down into our lives and world. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” we sing, “and ransom captive Israel.” We long for the Big Apocalyptic God to redeem this world in a Big way.

However, we must be careful not to assume to know what that “big thing” will look like or when it will take place. Consider for a minute the thoroughly surprising way God entered the world in the First Coming. God came to this world as a vulnerable baby, born to an unwed couple, in a backwater town, who when he grew up would be crucified like a common criminal. Nobody could have imagined that this would be the way God would bring healing and hope to our world. Remembering how God came into this world the first time might also help us not be so afraid when we think of God coming into the world a Second Time. What we discover in the God who came to us in Jesus is that God loves this world and desires not to destroy this world but to redeem this world.

And so we wait for this God of love to come to heal us. Advent is about our waiting and our longing. But we do not wait passively. Jesus tells his followers *how* to wait for his coming. He says, “It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work.” Each with his or her work.

What is the work God has given you to do as you wait and watch for Christ to come into your personal pain and into our broken world? Where does God need you to forgive, to heal, to feed, to speak out, to hold a hand, to write a letter, to wash a body, to hold a baby, to stock a shelf, to march in protest? What is the work God has given you to do?

Advent is a season that kind of messes with our minds. And that is because Advent blends together the past, the present, and the future. One part of Advent is our anticipation of the birth of the baby Jesus—an event that happened in the past. But another part of Advent is this anticipation of God’s future redemption of our world, a time of healing of all that is broken. And then both these past and future components are supposed to shape our *present*—they impact how we live *right now*. Faithful anticipation of the coming of Christ is not about sentimental remembrances of the babe in the manger, nor about calculating the exact time of the Messiah’s return as some Christians spend so much focus doing. Rather, faithful anticipation of the coming of Christ is about witnessing to his hope and love. Witnessing to his hope and love. Which is the work God has given us to do.

The best known apocalyptic writing in the Bible is the Book of Revelation. It is a book that has been erroneously used to scare a lot of people—but that is a sermon for another day. But this apocalyptic Book of Revelation ends with a three-word prayer: Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus is a good way to understand apocalyptic writings in the Bible. They are prayers for Christ to come. And “Come, Lord Jesus” is the best way to understand our Advent longings. As we open the newspaper, as we deal with the hardships and heartaches of our lives, we utter this prayer to our very big God who can do very big things: “Come, Lord Jesus.”