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## BEING PREPARED FOR WHAT'S COMING

Mark 13: 1-8, 24-37

Christmas is going to be hard this year... Even as we hold on to the hope that a vaccine for Covid is on the way, we still have to get through this Christmas and this winter. I don't know about you, but I've got some dread about it all...

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means coming. What's coming? Typically, the season of Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of Christmas. Christmas is about the Ground of all being, whom we name God, revealed to us in a whole new way, coming into the world as a child, a child named Jesus. Christmas is about birth and new birth, the gift of life and new life. And yet, how can we truly celebrate newness as a positive thing when we're still caught in the grip of a pandemic? How can we celebrate fully when we have to keep isolated as the numbers of those infected, ill and dead keep rising?

In preparing this sermon, I took some time to go online and read some stories of those who have succumbed to Covid and died. Numbers are reported daily, and we can get numb after a while. But each number represents a human being like you and me.

Here's one story, the story of Sharon Roberts. Sharon died of Covid in Toronto on May 1 of this year. She was 59 years old. Sharon was a Personal Support worker at Downsview Long-term Care Home. She had worked there for 24 years. She was also but one of many victims of Covid at that home. Sharon was remembered as a beautiful soul. One co-worker described her as someone who "treated the elderly residents at the home like her own family. Her death has left everyone heart-broken." Another described her as "a beautiful, wonderful, and loving person who loved to share everything she had." Her death was also described as senseless, and Sharon's family are outraged that more was not done to protect workers and residents. Their grief is bitter because they feel that if the home had been better prepared and better equipped, Sharon would still be alive.

And you know, it is hard to find peace and acceptance for what is, when more could and should be done to support care for our elderly and those on the

frontlines giving themselves to their care. Sharon is but one of thousands victimized by the virus.

And if this is not bad enough, there are those who are colleagues, family, friends and neighbours of victims like Sharon. They carry grief. They carry anger, frustration, stress and fear. And if this is not bad enough, we are all being challenged to follow ever more demanding rules of isolation, having to make difficult decisions as to who will be in our bubble as we prepare for Christmas celebrations. We not only grieve that. We dread it. How can any of this be good? It isn't. So how do we prepare for Christmas with some expectation of some gift we'll be given to sustain us as we live today and empower us with meaning and hope as we anticipate tomorrow?

Perhaps our scripture readings may offer us some revelatory wisdom for the living of this Advent season. Let's see. In all the gospel accounts, there is a whole chapter devoted to words of Jesus about apocalyptic crisis and doom to come. Why? Well, for one thing, the gospels were written down after some of these events actually took place. The gospel writers could look back decades earlier and remember Jesus' warnings about what was to come. They didn't understand it all then, but now that it had happened, it all made sense. What made sense exactly?

Well, even in Jesus day there were intensifying tensions between various factions within Jewish-Palestine, and these tensions came to a boiling point within a few decades. Armed militia groups representing various factions began to attack each other, and all of them were in revolt against Rome as well. Finally, the Roman emperor got fed up and sent in his legions led by his son, General Titus, who later became emperor of Rome himself. The Romans desecrated the temple and burned it to the ground. They set fire to the holy city Jerusalem and burned it to the ground. They massacred thousands of Jews indiscriminately and tens of thousands of crosses were erected with crucified corpses left on them for birds and animals to get at. This was a warning against any further revolutionary fervor.

So what was Jesus' warning about? Hate and violence only begets hate and violence. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. Jesus was preaching revolution too. But his revolution was based in the heart, because unless the heart in people was changed, one regime replacing another regime would only reflect more of the same. Jesus would be crucified because his vision of God as love and the kind of revolution such love would

ignite was not the kind of revolutionary fervor the leaders wanted to fuel in the people. Hate and violence directed at their enemies is what they wanted.

And so, Jesus had to be gotten rid of. Well, Jesus warns his followers not only of what's to come, but what will also happen to many of them caught in the vicious cycle of hate and violence. They will be persecuted by Jews for being Christ followers and they will be persecuted by Romans for being Jews. With the temple and holy city destroyed it will be akin to the end of the world. Look for the signs of it happening. Keep awake. And when you see what's coming, run if you can. If you can't escape it all, as many will not, be prepared by building up a resiliency of love within you starting now. You will suffer, but suffering and even death will not be the last word. There is hope. Christ will come again, not just as a babe, but as Lord and Christ, with great power and glory.

Wow! That's a powerful, inspiring and encouraging promise. But what actually happened? The destruction came. The persecution came. The suffering, loss and death came. But Christ coming in power and glory? That didn't happen in any obvious way... unless... unless we need to be looking for Christ in a different way than we're used to. What are we to look for in Christ's coming this Christmas?

For all of us, the promise of a vaccine is thrilling news. Ultimately, that is what will overcome the gloom, the dread, the fear and the pain of loss that we have been living with Covid. But just putting all the eggs of the meaning of our lives and the meaning of this time of our lives in the basket of a vaccine is like waiting for Christ to come in the clouds with great glory, bringing an end to the reign of terror, hate, violence and death. We are helpless victims awaiting a rescue in that way.

OK, preacher, so what's the alternative? Is the alternative trying to find a way to escape from it all, through food and drink and zoom celebrating, trying to shore up the sentimentality of the Christmas season any way we can? I certainly wouldn't want to minimize or dismiss the importance of finding any reason and means to celebrate and to escape a little the dreadful reality we are facing as we approach Christmas and winter. But there has to be more, no? Between being helpless victims on the one hand, awaiting the rescue of a vaccine, and trying to escape into some oblivion, on the other hand, through food and drink and some consumer spending... Is there something else, maybe something even better?

I believe there is. In our scripture reading Jesus insists that the messiah will come, that God's glory will be revealed. This means we should anticipate it and look for it, not give up and escape or just absorb the dread of what is and what's coming like passive victims. Jesus tells his followers to keep alert, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come... there are signs, like the sign of the fig tree: "as soon as its branches becomes tender and it puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near." But to see behind the signs of summer, or in our case: winter dread... to see Christ himself also coming... now that takes a special gift of seeing and hearing, a special openness of heart, a capacity for faith, hope and love like never before.

So what does such seeing and experiencing look like on the ground? What does keeping alert and awake look like for us? What does an openness of heart look like? What would faith, hope and love feel like in this Advent season?

First of all, we need to be present in the now. We have to let go grieving the past of what was before March, and we have to let go our pining for the future post-vaccine. What if the Ground of being, the Ground of our being is calling us in the midst of this emerging season of Christmas and winter, to be present now... to listen and pay attention and be present now... What will we hear and see, smell, taste and touch even if we can't do some of this literally with other people as we would like?

For me personally, I see what the philosopher Nietzsche called: a transvaluation of all values. What matters to you in your life? Do you spend your time and energy in frustration, blaming and shaming others as a way of releasing what's inside you... Or is it time to learn a whole new level of compassion in your heart, empathy, but even more than empathy, an ability to recognize others as siblings, as brothers and sisters and creations of God? How do we reach out to others and find fullness in ourselves? How will we have changed because of Covid, not in a bad and fearful way, but in the quality of our humanity and our developed capacity to absorb, to care and to find inner fullness differently than we've done it before?

These are big questions, and no simple or pat answers will do. But I, for one, will develop personal practices like mindfulness: taking the time to pay attention, to question my heart when there is frustration and judgment and

blame... or when there is just helpless hopelessness... I will question my heart, pay attention and keep awake, anticipating that the ground of being will birth something beautiful in me, in and through this time... If divine love will come into my heart and be birthed anew and in a whole new way in this unprecedented time, I need to put in extra effort and commitment to be present, to pay attention and to be open to what God will do in me and through me. I don't want to be just the same person after Covid as I have been before it. I want to grow. I want a fire in me to burn with greater passion that is love... I will pray for it... and I will pay attention...

What about you? Christ is coming as a babe... Christ is coming with great power and glory... will Christ come into your heart this season in an unprecedented way to meet these unprecedented times?  
Amen.