

We Are All Searching, Advent 1 (B) – Mark 13:24-37

We are all searching for something or someone. Not just the small things, like our house keys or a parking space, but also bigger things, deeper things, people, places, and relationships that we hope will fulfill us, bring us joy, grant us peace. Many people are searching for a job, but also more than a job, for the sense of purpose and value and security the hoped-for job will bring. Many people are searching for wisdom, but also more than just an education, for the sense of truth and goodness and direction that we hope real wisdom will bring. Many people are searching for relationships, but also more than Mr. or Mrs. Right, for the sense of fulfillment and flourishing we hope loving and being loved will bring. We are all searching for something or someone.

But experience teaches us that that something or someone is elusive. We photograph the perfect sunset, but when we look at the pictures later, it looks rather ordinary. The excitement of a new career settles into the humdrum of a job. The first flush of a new relationship turns into coordinating schedules and dates. Even when we find what we think we are looking for, we may find the experience quite exquisite but also leaving us unsatisfied.

That is why spiritual writers tell us that what we are all searching for, whether we realize it or not, is God. The longed-for thing or person who will ultimately fulfill us, bring us joy, and grant us peace is God. Everything else, even the exquisitely true and good and beautiful things of this life, will leave us unsatisfied at some level. Life is transient, and we continue our search for true fulfillment and flourishing and love.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells his disciples to “keep awake.” This admonition comes at the end of a long apocalyptic prophetic and catastrophic discourse about the end times. He and his disciples had left the temple, and he told them that someday it would be thrown down, not one stone left upon another. The disciples naturally enough ask when this will be, and Jesus responds with a long discourse that involves apocalyptic signs like the sun being darkened and the stars falling like the heaven. It’s all rather complex and confusing, but in the midst of it there is an assurance that someday the Son of Man will return to set things right.

This will be good news for some and bad news for others. We ought to prepare so that we can receive the coming of the Lord as good news. And yet, no one knows, not even the Son, when all these things will take place. But take place they will.

Therefore, Jesus says, keep awake, keep alert, and keep looking for the true Lord who will bring all things to fulfillment. There will be many pretenders, many people saying, “Look here is the messiah” or “Look! There he is!” But do not believe in these pretenders. They are false and they will let you down. Trust only in the true God, the Lord of heaven and earth, and his only Son. Keep awake for someday he will come. Apocalyptic language is hard for us to understand today. But the basic message is easy enough. We are all looking for something, and that something is God. There will be many pretenders and false messiahs who will try to offer us the fulfillment that only

God can provide. Remember the allure of the perfect job or perfect wisdom or perfect relationship. All these things inevitably let us down because they can't deliver the promises they make. They are good enough in themselves, but when we look to them as our ultimate source of truth and meaning, they inevitably let us down and leave us feeling unsatisfied. More than that, we can be damaged in the process: broken promises, broken relationships, broken hearts, broken spirits. Only God can truly fulfill us and the desires of the whole groaning universe. Jesus tells us to keep awake, to turn away from false messiahs, and to look for the coming of the true God. The Good News is that even as we flit about in our search for truth and meaning, God in his holiness and his graciousness is already racing to meet us. God is coming. The Son of Man is coming. Keep awake!

Advent is the season in the church year when we try to reflect on who or what we are truly searching for. It is a time to meditate and pray about what it is that will fulfill our hearts' desires. The Good News of Advent is that God is also searching for us. The story of Advent is not a story of a God waiting to see if we human beings will finally figure it out and find God. The story of Advent is that God comes to us, and better yet, that God has already found us. We may feel like we are always looking for something or someone, but the Good News of Advent is that God has already come to us, is coming to us, and will keep coming to us. In our searching and seeking, we often fail to see that the gift has already been given, the gift of "God with us," the gift of Emmanuel.

The word "advent" means "coming," and that refers to the coming of Christ in the past, in the present, and in the future. Advent is saying that there is never a time when Christ is not with you, yesterday and today and tomorrow. At its deepest level, Advent is an invitation to give up our search and let ourselves be found by the God who came among us as child, by the God who comes into our hearts, by the God who will meet us in every future. In the search, in the finding, in the daily living of our lives, we have already been found and loved by the God who is with us always, even to the end of the ages.

Elam Davies, long-time pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells of a time when he and his wife visited a spot on the coast of Wales called the Great Orme. The Great Orme is a giant rock, right at the seaside, and people gather on it to watch sunsets. On clear evenings, people watch the yellow sun drop into the sea, backlighting strands of clouds in a way that turns the whole horizon into a kaleidoscope. Because the sunsets are so spectacular, people at the Great Orme often weep. One night, while Davies and his wife were there, a beat-up, old car drew alongside of them. In this car were a couple of elderly people and also a man who seemed to be their son. Some accident or illness had come to this son with the result that he was clearly disabled. He lay in the back seat, limp and exhausted. Then, as the great ball of fire began its final descent to the sea, the two old folks got out of the car and came round to the back seat. They reached in, hoisted their son up to the sitting position, and maneuvered him forward to the edge of the seat. And just as the sun in its full flame, in a final burst of glory, dropped below the rim of the world, the parents

reached under their boy's chin, raised his head, and pointed him out there toward the horizon. Davies says, "And I knew at that moment that God can dazzle us with all the magnificence of the universe, but that the *secret* of the universe lies in a love that comes to us in our weakness and in our need."

The season of Advent begins today. It is the season of hope. Stay alert. Keep awake. Lift up your heads. Look to the horizon. Look to the future. Look for the God who comes to us, who came to us, who is with us, now and until the end of the ages.