

"Let There Be...Hope!"

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37

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I was an anxious kid. I mean really, really anxious. I worried about everything. Every bump in the night was a burglar. Every storm cloud that approached was the beginnings of a tornado. Every headache or unexplained bruise was a sure sign of cancer. I don't know where this anxiety came from; I'm sure that part of it was that I have always been an avid reader and as such, I was exposed to all kind of literary-sponsored calamities. Either way, it didn't take much to heighten my anxiety.

So it's probably no wonder that texts like today's lectionary passages always made me uncomfortable when I was younger. I didn't like the darkness I associated with them. Whenever the minister would read a passage like this one from Mark or from Revelation or Daniel or any other text that felt remotely threatening, I would silently wish we were reading something a little more upbeat — maybe a story about David and Goliath, or Jonah and the whale, or Balaam and his famous donkey. I didn't want to have to confront my own fears of the unknown, my own mortality, or my own sins. I wanted all of my Bible stories to make me feel good, not make me think about the complexity of God's world and my role in it.

Today's text from Mark is filled with elements that might make us uncomfortable. Earlier in chapter 13, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and then takes a few of his disciples aside to discuss the end of the age. The verses immediately preceding today's lectionary passage are filled with warnings against false prophets and false indicators of the end times. And immediately following today's text, Mark moves into his version of the passion. It is truly an anxiety-producing text — for the disciples who heard it first, for Mark's first century CE listeners, and perhaps for us today.

This text from Mark is known as the "Little Apocalypse." It probably doesn't come as a surprise when we listen to the descriptions in the text — "But in those days, after that suffering, 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." That's some pretty heavy, apocalyptic stuff.

But today is the first Sunday of Advent — a season in which we fill our time with tree decorating, Christmas carol-singing, and gift giving. So why are we beginning this be-of-good-cheer-season with such a dark text? My sermon title is "Let there be...Hope!" Where's the hope in this text?

As much as we'd like to think that Advent is about baby Jesus and angels and Mary pondering all of these things in her heart, many of our Advent texts force us to take a step back from the manger and consider how we got here in the first place.

We are a broken people, living in a broken world, barely functioning, but definitely participating in very broken systems, in need of a Savior who will not only save us, but guide us. Even though they might make us uncomfortable, sometimes we need to spend some time in these apocalyptic texts to be reminded of what it is we believe, who our God is, and the hope that we find in Christ.

Apocalyptic literature accomplishes several things. It offers hope to the hopeless and reveals something that has been hidden from plain sight, all while being packaged in deeply symbolic texts in which we can still find modern applications for our lives today. We don't get to just leave these uncomfortable texts in the first century. We carry them with us.

New Testament professor Judy Yates Siker describes apocalyptic literature as a phenomenon that, "grows out of difficult political and social crisis."¹ Prophets write apocalyptic literature when the people desperately need to hear a word of hope that their oppressors will not win, that the situation in which they find themselves will not be forever.

When we read apocalyptic writings in our Bible, we can pinpoint who the oppressors are. In the Old Testament, apocalyptic writings pop up when the Jewish people are under Babylonian, then Persian, and then Greek rule. In the New Testament, the oppressor is largely Rome as we see in Revelation. While the oppressors are all from different nations, these writings all feature messages of hope for a people who were certainly living under political and social crisis.

The messages of these texts apply to us now. If we look at our world today, we can see difficult political and social crisis wherever we turn. In fact, my guess is that quite a few folks reading these texts this morning feel a little bit more connected to them than they might have a year ago.

I don't know about you, but throughout this pandemic, I have alternated between two major emotions or reactions to the circumstances around me. I have either been able to tell myself, "Okay, I can keep doing this. Online worship is happening every week. We are checking in with each virtually. We can do this..." and — "Oh my gosh this is the worst. Is this forever? This is forever, isn't it? We're going to be living in Pandemia forever."

It's when I'm stuck in the "this is going to last forever" perspective, that I actually find comfort now in texts like the ones from Isaiah and Mark for today. These texts tell us — No! The sufferings of this world will not last forever.

¹ Judy Siker; Feasting on the Word

Professor Christopher R. Hutson writes that “the basic message of apocalyptic visions is this: The rebellion against the reign of God is strong, as the wicked oppress the righteous. Things will get worse before they get better. But hang on just a little longer, because just when you are sure you cannot endure, God will intervene to turn the world right side up.”² Jesus’s fig tree parable in today’s Mark text reminds us that winter does not last for ever. There are signs that summer is near!

We can rely on this truth because we know that Babylon is no longer in power over the Jewish people. Rome no longer oppresses the Christian Church. The promises in ancient apocalyptic texts have proven true. Because we have these texts, we can remember that God has delivered God’s people from oppression before and God will continue to do that.

Our job, though, is to take the hope found in the texts and both share that hope with others as well as be active in fighting the oppression that we see right now. As verse 34 reminds us — we each have our work to do while we wait for the coming of the Son of Man.

And so what is our work? How do we know the work to which we are called? I believe that the answer is in another element of apocalyptic writing.

The Greek word for “apocalypse” actually means “revelation.” It’s why we call the last book of the Bible, “Revelation.” The full title, translated from the first few words in Greek is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ to his Servant, John.” In this book, Jesus reveals to John of Patmos all of the things that will come to pass when Rome is finally defeated. All of these future things had been hidden, and Jesus revealed them to John so that John could record them and share them with the world.

A revelation had occurred. A mini-revelation occurs in today’s text from Mark. Jesus reveals something to the disciples that had been hidden from them up until now.

Revelation still happens today. It might not take the same form as Jesus talking directly to the disciples or to John, but if we pay attention we can still discern where God is directing our attention. The curtain can still be pulled back so that we can observe that which has been hidden. And sometimes what has been hidden is by our own doing.

When the pandemic began and things began to shut down, I noticed a series of Facebook posts from a seminary classmate of mine. On March 12, Claudia, a Mexican-American Presbyterian pastor offered this post:

“This pandemic will uncover many of the sins of this country in unimaginable ways.” She went on to list, almost prophetically, what would happen to specific groups of people as we faced the first days of the shut down. She wrote, “People who make a living by working many part-time jobs and day laborers will be asked to and will need to keep working until they cannot do so. They will have contact with many people who may

² Christopher Hutson; Feasting on the Word

be infected (especially those in the restaurant and hospitality industries). They are less likely to be insured. They are less likely to go to the doctor even if they feel sick.

They won't receive a paycheck while their places of employment close down. They won't receive any mercy if they don't pay rent on time. So... as businesses, non-profits, educational institutions, and communities of faith make important decisions, keep in mind those who will be [in trouble] either way.”

And she was right. Like a prophet in our own time, Claudia managed to predict exactly what happened to the many part-time and day laborers in our country.

She continued to post articles that she found that uncovered the sins of our nation. She shared an article about the amount of gun and ammunition sales that rose exponentially in Colorado where she lives. She shared an article about farmworkers who have no health insurance but are deemed “essential.” She shared a segment from PBS’ “NewsHour” which highlighted the disparities in health care between Blacks and Whites in America. She continued highlighting these sins, providing articles, podcasts, and interviews to shed light on them.

Her posts have stayed with me. I’ve been thinking about them for eight months now — how this pandemic has revealed our deepest sins. While many of Claudia’s arguments were related to economic injustice, I think if we dig down deep within ourselves, we can list some other sins that this pandemic has revealed.

Our country’s focus on individualism has cost us dearly. We are not willing to band together to protect everyone if it means inconvenience for us. Children without internet access are falling more and more behind in school compared to their classmates, but internet companies have refused in the past to provide internet to the poorest locations in our county because it wasn’t financially viable. We are learning that we are a deeply impatient bunch. Over the past week or so, we’ve heard about several different vaccines with high success rates that are just around the corner — and yet we can’t — or won’t — hunker down just a little bit longer. We have let partisan politics divide us so much that wearing a mask — a literal act of loving our neighbor — is seen as taking a side.

Claudia is right. This pandemic has been a revelation of sorts. It has revealed just how broken we are and just how much we need the hope that Jesus offers. It has been a wake-up call for us. For some of us, a part of us has always known there was this kind of discrimination and disparity in our nation. For others, this is shockingly new information.

So what do we do with what has been revealed? What do we do at the beginning of this Advent season in a year in which we feel that we’ve never needed hope more?

We follow Jesus's instructions to his disciples. We wait and we work. We wait for the hope we have in Jesus that the pains of this world will not go on forever, that evil will not win. We invite others to see the wondrous things that God has done for Creation since the dawn of time. And we keep working to pull back the curtain, to find those on the margins who have been hidden away, to shed light on their predicament, and to fight for justice for them.

The tree *will* burst forth with fruit once again. God's justice and righteousness will be prevail. Always.

So let there be...Hope.

All praise be to God.
Amen.