

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • NOVEMBER 29, 2020
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
“NOT SO FAR”

The Scripture
Mark 13:24-37

*“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.*

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in cloud’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“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. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

The Message
Not So Far: Hope
Mark Briley



Distance is on the mind these days. ‘*Social distancing*’ will surely be among the top “*Words of the Year*” for 2020. *Are we too close? Are we far enough apart?* We name the challenges of long-distance relationships and sometimes exchange ‘absence’ in the phrase saying instead: “*Distance makes the heart grow fonder.*” When we think of our culture today from the pandemics of COVID and racism to the distance we’ve known given polemic political stripes, it’s hard to imagine the hope, peace, joy and love of the Advent season to come all that close this year. We might quickly quip when thinking of any of those joyous seasonal wonders, “*Well, not so far!*” But, the gift of Christmas is the love of Christ come close. Maybe these realities are *not so far* after all? That’s the question we’re asking as we launch an Advent sermon series today called “*Not so Far.*” Today we wonder about hope, and like Grover on *Sesame Street*, help me out from your couches at home, kids, we wonder if hope is... *near...* or... *far.*

When COVID hit like an unexpected vacuum salesman at our front door, dumping a load in the front room of our lives, we were all put on our heels. It couldn’t last long though, could it? A week or two and we’ll have this thing whipped and the NCAA tournament can resume as planned. As the days pass and we’re still hoping for a semblance of life as it once was, hope has eluded us. Can hope *end* a pandemic? *Not so far.* What are we to do with hope?

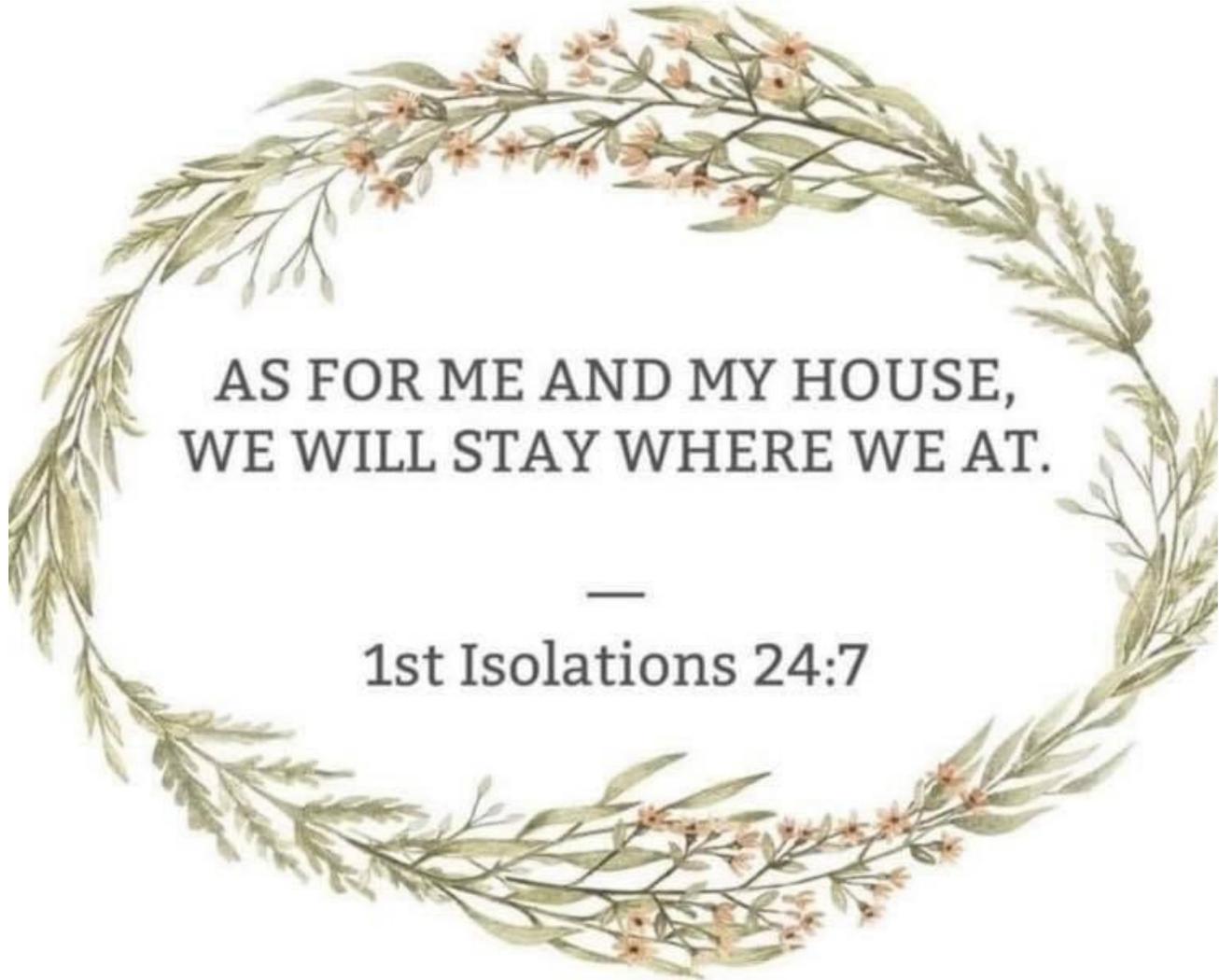
On this first Sunday of Advent, we lean on the word from Mark’s Gospel that says, “*Don’t go to sleep on hope.*” And we need it more than ever, don’t we? We know it when we see it in others. I saw this picture this week that made me hopeful.



Are we looking out into the future with that kind of eagerness? I want to be that close to hope. The season of Advent launches us with hope... always with hope. Hope is the undergirding foundation of the whole thing.

The word “*Advent*” is rooted in the Latin word for “*coming.*” For Christians, it is an expectant season of watching and waiting – celebrating the coming of Christ to the world in that stellar way with mangers and shepherds, innkeepers and donkeys, typically starring in children’s plays all over the world at this time. Advent is also the first day of the Christian year. A year ago this week, I quoted Sarah Bessey, author, preacher, and self-proclaimed “*Recovering know it all,*” who wrote a beautiful Advent word that is more potent today than it was a year ago. The title says it well enough: “*Does Advent Even Matter When the World is on Fire?*” Some of us are feeling this. The mess of division. The political elbows being thrown left and right. The heartbreak of the world’s refugees. The COVID isolation.

I saw a post this week that quoted the almost biblical:



AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE,
WE WILL STAY WHERE WE AT.

—

1st Isolations 24:7

@SISTASinZION

And I can hear you now... *“Briley, you want us to get all eggnog cozy and hopeful and Christmas sweatery right now?”*

Someone else said it with resignation in her voice, *“It’s almost time to switch from your regular anxiety to your fancy Christmas anxiety.”* Bessey points to the pain, however, and says, *“Here’s the thing. We enter into Advent precisely because we are paying attention [to the pain of the world]. It’s because everything hurts that we prepare for Advent. It’s because we have stood in hospital rooms and gravesides, empty churches, and quiet bedrooms that we resolutely lay out candles and matches. We don’t get to have hope without having grief. Hope dares to admit that not everything is as it should*

be, and so if we want to be hopeful, first we must grieve. First we have to see that something is broken and there is a reason for why we need hope to begin with.”¹

Amazingly, this is also the context of Mark’s gospel lectionary reading assigned for this day. The lectionary is a tool that helps an individual or community cover the gamut of Scripture matching important themes with important seasons. And it is such a tool that says, *“Here. This crazy-hard text from Mark’s gospel is one you need to consider on the first day of the Christian year. Happy New Year!”*

This passage falls under a style of writing we call apocalyptic literature – apocalyptic meaning *“uncovering”* or *“revealing.”* It is utilized throughout Scripture by the likes of Daniel and, most notably to the widest audience, the work of Revelation. It’s a style that is likened to a child crawling up on the lap of God and watching intently as God turns page after page of a pop-up book full of poetic imagery, cryptic, symbolic language, and evocative visions of hope when all seems hopeless. Jesus – who is our noted teacher in this pericope (or passage) by Mark – employs this style of prophetic story-telling that would have rung many familiar bells with his audience; something important for us to note as we deal with an ancient and sacred text. Context matters.

It’s why our own Deb Carr is writing the background of one of the hymns we’ll sing week to week this season. Understanding the context from which the hymn was birthed brings the music to life all the more. Think about listening to John Williams instrumental soundtrack of Jurassic Park without seeing the overlay of those amazing dinosaurs. You may sense some change in mood but the images partner with the music to bring it all into proper context and understanding. To read this passage from Mark without some of the understanding of the context makes it seem more like a mad lib where we just plug in random nouns and adjectives creating a funny sounding story.

Mark’s gospel, the earliest written of any of the gospels, was written around 70 CE – during, or just after the disastrous Jewish revolt against the Roman imperial occupation in Palestine. Mark’s world was shattered – all stability gone. R.E.M.’s *“It’s the End of the World as We Know It”* played like a broken record – only no one felt fine. The Roman armies squelched the rebellion and, most notably destroyed the Jewish temple which, for the Jews, was nothing less than the sacred heart of the world. In the midst of this catastrophe, Mark writes this gospel account recognizing the need for hope in the chaos.

To really hear the text or see the scene that accompanies the soundtrack Mark is playing, my friend and creative theologian of the arts, Liz Myer Boulton says we have to enter the desolation and shock *“alongside the traumatized soldier, the displaced refugee, the pregnant teenager, the heartbroken addict.”²*

¹ sarahbessey.com

² <https://www.saltproject.org/>

Maybe you know exactly how this feels right now. If not from your own sense of personal grief, heartache, or despair, the state of the world presents this tension to us with breaking news upon breaking news. And as the media would have us know; everything is breaking news! We are in a constant state of chaos and bewilderment.

This sort of context is where the gospel writer Mark lives; these are the depths from which he attempts to proclaim the good news. It's no wonder, in a world of devastation, that a people would want Jesus to return to clean up the mess.

I have prayed such a prayer, at times out of sheer exhaustion of it all. "*Fix it! Jesus!*" You start to wonder what it was like for Elijah to just be strolling along with his buddy only to be yanked out of this world by a fiery chariot; pulled to the heavens. I've been leaving the moon roof open in my car just in case. It's not all that surprising, then, that many in Mark's day, and many in our own, were... or are... obsessed with the second coming of Christ.

Preaching great, Fred Craddock, dropped some wisdom when he said, "*Many people are obsessed with the second coming because, deep down, they were really disappointed in the first one.*"

We know the story of that disappointment, yes? Jesus could not be the Messiah the people had been waiting for – he was too passive. He wasn't a warrior. He didn't write enough angry political rants on social media. His Strength Finders categories didn't align. His Enneagram number wasn't in-your-face enough. The first coming of Christ was this baby that we fuss over at Christmas. Could God be any less aggressive? A baby? (*I won't ask new parents to answer this question right now. Too Soon!*)

As an adult, Jesus didn't say, "*Nuke your enemy.*" He said, "*Love them.*" He didn't say, "*Use your privilege to get ahead.*" He said, "*Make your privilege the gift of serving the underprivileged.*"

And so, we are probably all guilty of praying for Jesus to return like the Messiah everyone wanted the first time – a "*Fix it, Messiah!*" with power and force. I think Jesus, in speaking to us about the state we are in today, would say, "*Refer to my words the first time around. They still hold.*"

Now, I think Jesus would offer new insight if he were in the flesh today. I think his "*Parables: the Early Years*" would still apply, but I can only imagine the potency of the parables he would tell us today. How would we be shocked into a new understanding of the realm of God? His words are the only thing with staying power. He says so in this passage. "*Everything in life will pass away – ebb and flow – but my words will always hold true.*"

When I think about all of these things coming and going, I think of trendy fads that have popped in and out of our lives through the years. You probably have some favorites over time. Bell Bottoms, Razor Scooters, Livestrong wristbands, The Crimper, flash mobs, "Vote for Pedro" T-shirts, speed dating, Sideburns, Tebowing, Pogs, the "Macarena." Don't be offended if I named something you're still holding onto. I'm not cool enough myself to keep up with what's in and out. Fads are simply, according to official definition, "*An intense but short-lived fashion; craze; notion, manner of conduct, etc., especially one followed enthusiastically by a group.*"

How about this one: pet rocks. Anyone have a pet rock? Over a six-month period in the mid-1970s, 1.5 million pet rocks were sold. They were smooth stones sold in cardboard boxes with a nest of straw and breathing holes. They were rocks! The rock would even come with a training manual that would provide the owner with all the instructions needed to properly care for their "*pet.*" The manual contained all kinds of commands that you could use to train your pet: "*roll over,*" "*stay,*" and even "*sit.*" Needless to say, the pet rock wouldn't do anything but sit there so that was the only command that worked. And sane, normal people -- teachers, lawyers, stockbrokers -- went to work, and they had a pet rock on their desk. Gary Dahl, inventing the Pet Rock after listening to his friends complain about their pets one night, laughed all the way to the bank with the millions he made on rocks in the 1970s. Crazy things catch our fancy, do they not?³

The apocalyptic elements of Scripture like we're dealing with in Mark's account today have set off some fads of their own over time – this obsession with many predicting the end of the world – all of which, so far, have fallen flat. Many think this must come with fear – "*Fear God! Pack your manna sandwiches for December 19, or you'll be left behind in this hell hole of a world.*" Some just treat it like a game or a chance to play a Nicholas Cage character in real life. Why predict such a time? Think of the money and time that have been invested in such an endeavor.

A few years back, radio preacher Harold Camping studied the Bible and came to the conclusion that the world would end May 21, 2011. After sharing this prediction with his listeners, he used millions of dollars of their donations to put his message on 5,000 billboards. Camping estimated that 7-billion people would die. May 21 came and went with no return of Christ. Camping's followers expressed astonishment and disappointment. Some denounced him as a false prophet. He amended the date to October 21, which also didn't pan out well for him. In his biblical study, he must have missed this passage where Jesus, himself, says, "*No one knows the day or hour, not even me.*"

And ever since, generations of folks have prayed, "*Lord, come!*" It would be such a relief, wouldn't it? But our Christian faith was never indented to be an escape route.

³ Info on Pet Rocks, Harold Camping and association of fads to this Markan text inspired by *From Fad to Foundation*, work of Bob Kaylor, Senior Writer, for *Homiletics*.

Apocalyptic literature can remind us of our mortality. It can create some focus, some needed perspective; but our lives aren't to be like one giant *Escape Room* like that of the recent recreational craze.

If anything, this passage on the first Sunday of Advent should ask us to consider how close we want to get to Christmas this year. What would be important for us to do to help hope to seem not so far away? What would be important for us *not* to do? If we're not just throwing up our hands until Jesus returns and are actually to be the Body of Christ as Jesus expects us to be, at minimum, we should take care of the choices we make. And, if his words never pass away, his greatest commandment should guide our choices – *Love God. Love neighbor.*

What would it look like to honor that command with new intentionality between now and Christmas? How could you embody hope to the world that would move the meter from '*lonely exile here*' to '*the thrill of hope*'? I think that's the Advent movement we should press for this year. From the Advent hymn we sing that says "*O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here*" to the Christmas beauty of the song we'll hear on Christmas Eve – "*The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn...*". How do we get from *here* to *there* with that spirit?

You'll soon read about our plans for Christmas Eve in the "Broadway Life" ... just a nudge to be sure you read how you can join in all that's happening through Broadway this season. It's going to be memorable...if not epic! I so want you to have that thrill of hope when we gather to raise candles in our parking lot on Christmas Eve. It will take some effort to get from one lit candle today to hundreds that will light the sky on Christmas Eve.

It comes with the words you choose to use yet this afternoon. It comes with being more generous today than we were yesterday. Jesus says it comes when we stay awake – fully alert to the chance to be a positive hope in so many places that try to command something other than the complete love of God and neighbor. Will you take that intentional step toward Christmas today?

Vietnamese monk, Nhat Hanh said, "*I have arrived. I am home. My destination is in each step.*" I feel more than fine to leave the end of the world as we know it to God almighty. That is God's to do. What is ours to do? We've just hung the greens as a way of saying, "*This season is different. It's started. And I'm ready to pay attention to what it means for my life... for the world.*" Today you decide just how far away hope will be this Christmas. "

Keep awake. Be patient. Hope for the Lord to come again and again and make his presence known in the way you live." Are you up for the waiting and watching and

stepping in faith? It may be the only way to make Christmas feel not so far this year and... to arrive at the manger with the thrill of hope.

May it be so.

Song of Response
“A Future and a Hope”
Words and Music: Ed Varnum

1. Our God, you offer Life, a future and a hope.
But around us is such strife; don't know if we can cope.
It's like the sun is hidden and the moon has lost its light;
darkest days and fearful nights here on this slippery slope.

Our God who was and is and is to come,
says, “I will lift your night into a glorious dawn.”
As sure there's tomorrow at the rising of the sun,
God's joy will go before us.
As Christ our Lord said, “Watch!” God is not done!

2. God opens doors of promise, watch for them as you go.
Eyes open not to miss it, the grace that God bestows.
Keep watching! Christ is with you, his peace and joy to know
in the God of your salvation, a future and a hope.

Our God who was and is and is to come,
says, “I will lift your night into a glorious dawn.”
As sure there's tomorrow at the rising of the sun,
God's joy will go before us.
As Christ our Lord said, “Watch!” God is not done!