

“Come, Lord Jesus! – but not right now”

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The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

November 27, 2005

Sermon Text: Mark 13:24-37

Happy New Year! It's the first Sunday in Advent. It's the beginning of the Christian New Year. If you've been in church on a regular basis, you know that. If you didn't know that, now you do. Happy New Year!

Did you hear that Gospel lesson from Mark? Why do you think we begin the Christian New Year by focusing on the end? Well, I think, for the same reason runners focus on the finish line. There is so much along the way that might distract you that the finish line must be your focus. We are those who do not believe that a successful life equals he who dies with the most toys, wins. We are those who believe that those who cling to God, and accept the call to reach out to others in God's name, win. Win a good, connected life here, and an eternal life connected to God later. When you begin a year preaching Christ's second coming, it puts a sense of urgency in the rest of the year, and it's supposed to. Look around, and look within. It is not time, and they do not meet our needs, the decorations and Frosty the Snowman and Rudolf the Reindeer and Old St. Nick. It is time to remember God came to us as a babe in a manger with a plan and an offer. He came as a babe with an eye to an ending, a way to draw all people to himself by way of a cross and a resurrection so that during our lives and at the end of all things, we would cling to him and to healing and holding and true life, which is salvation. Jesus came offering real life here and eternal life beyond. Advent is the proper time. Advent, when it's getting darker, earlier each day, darker until we approach the day with the very least light of the year, and I think that's right around December 23, and then Christmas on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the light starts to win out, and the days grow longer and longer as darkness is overcome. Now many of you know that this phenomena was first noticed by pagans and celebrated by them, but the Christian church took it away, and we baptized, and we use that seasonal reality to underline the truth of the Gospel we hear in the beginning of the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God, and in Him was life.” The life was the light of men, and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it, and the darkness cannot and will never overcome it, this light of God that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

You know, the world is a dark place, and without God, without concern or compassion for others, our hearts can be dark and cold as well. It is hard to care, and there are so many things to care about. It is hard to keep our compassion in gear when there is so much suffering in the world. It is so much easier to just change the channel, and watch old “I Love Lucy” reruns, and take the phone off the hook, but light in the darkness is what God has given us in Jesus Christ, and light in the darkness is what we are called to be in His name as we live.

On this first Sunday of preaching the New Year, we declare the world is dark, and may get even darker, but God's light in Christ cannot be put out. We will witness our faith and His light within us no matter what it costs, and even when things look bleak, that's what this Scripture is about. We know how the world ends. God wins, and God redeems. Advent begins the Christian year by looking with anticipation to the day when

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Christ brings all things to completion, and the deepest longings of all creation are satisfied. Christmas is not an end in and of itself. Christmas is a decisive move toward the ultimate establishment of God’s reign. If this sounds strange to you, remember we pray that every single week, some of us every single day, “Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.” Also at every Communion service, we say, “Christ has died. Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.”

We are not here to worship some dry and dusty God who acted long ago in the past. We worship as those who have caught a glimpse of God’s life in spite of the darkness all around us, a God who is still acting. The world is out of joint, and we feel it, and we see it on the evening news, and we see it in ourselves. This Gospel lesson reminds us on the very first Sunday of the Christian calendar that this could be the year when the Son of Man comes on the clouds with great glory! Don’t go to sleep on us! Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold! Jesus did not see history as a cycle of the rise and fall of nations and the gradual improvement of the human condition by our efforts, by legislation or education or information or social policy. We have more laws than we have ever had. Are we better than we have ever been? We have more education and information out there on the Internet than ever before! Are we more educated than ever? Social policy has redistributed wealth in some good ways, but it cannot create compassion or community. Jesus preached history as a line with a beginning and an ending. Humanity is filled with the hubris that we do not need God, and falling further into despair and chaos the further we drift away. Where is the hope? In the beginning, God, and in the end, God.

At Advent, we face the darkness with hope. God calls us to listen to the hungers and the hopes that well up within us, and we stand on the tiptoes of our souls and we crane our necks to peer over the horizon to see if we can make out the source of that light we have glimpsed, drawing ever nearer.

I remember once, straight out of seminary, my first church down in Hardeeville, near Savannah, Georgia. We had a lot of people stop to ask for help from I-95 going very near the church. I remember one man stopped, a hitchhiker. He wanted some, and we gave him some food and some help. We were talking about the end of the world, and he said, “Do you think it will come soon?” I told him I didn’t really like talking about that, the end, the apocalypse, it seems wrong to preach it. It scares people. The young man looked up at me and said, “The idea of it scared me into God’s arms.” I rethought.

Sometimes it takes the thread of chaos to bring people near to God. Now, this is a funny story. It is recorded as a true story. It happened in Charleston at the big earthquake they had over a century ago. There was a proud and ever so proper congregation in Charleston during the great earthquake, very formal, not much singing, never an Amen, never a note of praise, but when the building began to shake, and they began to fall out of their pews, these quiet, proper Christians began to weep and scream and pray at the top of their voices. Formality, as you can imagine, was forgotten. Each time a new quake would hit, they would cry more vociferously. Finally, a devout, old, black matron came

up to the front of the church, and with much pleasure and confidence was looking at them as they wailed and prayed, and when the tremors subsided, as the story goes, when the people calmed down a little, the little old woman would pray out, “Shake ‘em again, Lord, shake ‘em again!” We may need some shaking from time to time. We say we look forward, and our whole service today says we look forward to God’s coming. Like the prophet Isaiah, you heard Rudy read a few moments ago, we say and we sing our yearning, our hungering for God’s coming. Isaiah said, “Oh, that you would tear open the Heavens and come down.” Notice the rest of that. Isaiah speaks of the nagging sense of God’s abstinence, the feeling of being abandoned in a world sliding inexorably into chaos and destruction. These words were written almost 3,000 years ago. Surprisingly contemporary, aren’t they? “Oh that you would tear open the Heavens and come down.” Isaiah remembers God’s saving deeds in the past, and he bemoans God’s apparent inactivity in the present. “Act again,” pleads Isaiah, “so that the nations might tremble in your presence.” The psalmists said the same thing, “Restore to us, God, the light of your presence so that we can be saved.”

Every person – I think every person – with half a spiritual sensibility has felt that yearning. We long for the day when there will be no more abandonment, when every tear will be wiped from every eye, and there will be no more sorrow and no more pain and no more death. Death will be swallowed up forever. God will be all and all. Our hope is in Christ, who has promised us that day is coming, but there is a flip side to this yearning and hope. There is fear. You can sense it in the Gospel lesson when he speaks of the coming reign of God. Jesus speaks with this heavy apocalyptic language of the sun being darkened, of the moon refusing to shine, of the stars falling from heaven, and signs and wonders and terrors and traumas and angels gathering, and Christ coming on the cloud and great power and glory. Yes, there is fear. For the coming of that day, we want and pray. Do we really? Are we working for that day? Are we ready for that day? Are we?

Corrie TenBoom has this question in the book entitled, Amazing Love 101. She says, “If I straighten the pictures on the walls in your home, I am committing no sin, am I? Suppose that your house is on fire, and I still went calmly about straightening the pictures on your wall. What would you say then? Would you think I was merely stupid or very wicked?” The world is on fire. What are you doing to extinguish the fire?

We say in our worship, “Come, Lord Jesus,” but under our breath, many of us say, “But not right now, not right now. Things are going pretty good for me. Not bad.” It’s easy to say come, Lord Jesus, come, but do I really want that day to come on this day? Am I ready for Christ to come again? Are we so in love and embraced in God’s arms that this world could pass away with no sadness? Or are we deeply worldly on some accounts and unready to part with what is ours here for what awaits us with God there? Can we sincerely say as the church has always said, “Come, Lord Jesus,” and say it with the confidence and the readiness of those who are completely owned by the God at the beginning and the ending. Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus, come.

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We have all heard the saying, “Carpe diem.” Seize the day. I have a coffee mug somewhere that says, “Carpe carpum.” Seize the carp. That wasn’t in my notes. I sometimes just lose it. Carpe Diem, seize the day. It’s a familiar philosophy, but is that Christian? No! Carpe diem is the model of those who say we all die, sooner than you think, so eat and drink and be merry. In my generation, and some of you are of my generation if you’re from 48 to about 55, we had a saying, well, some of us did, “Live hard, die young, leave a good looking corpse.” Carpe diem. How different that is from Maranatha, Lord, come. Lord come implies, Lord, things are wrong. Lord, I am wrong. Lord, I am not at home here. Lord, come. Instead of seize the day, the Gospel warns, “Cling to the maker of all days and the ender of all days, the alpha and the omega.” That is what that means. Alpha and omega, God before the beginning and God after the ending. Cling to the uncreated creator because one day, creation will be no more. It is made of dust and rust and decay. Nothing here lasts. Nothing! We know that well enough.

Last night, I went to visit my father. He’s been ailing recently. I found him returning from one of his best friend’s funeral. His friend, Barney, they grew up next door to each other. They went all through school together. They hunted together. He was one of the closest friends. He was almost like a brother. They still kept in contact, and suddenly without warning, his friend Barney died. Even our very best friends and relations die. Our hope is in the God who made Heaven and Earth, nothing and no one here, and our faith is one, which shows what we believe by how loosely we hold the things of this earth. We know they do not last, and so we are freer to give. We know that there is nothing trustworthy and lasting here, and so we are slower to panic. We are more generous with what we know will one day be dust. More generous because we know it has always belonged to God and always will. Knowing these things, how then should we live? How then should we live? We should feel come, Lord, and find us in readiness, come, Lord, and find us loving as you have loved, come and find us using the gifts you have given us, come and find us sharing the faith that we have with those who have not heard or those who have forgotten the power of the Gospel and just walked away. Come, Lord Jesus and find us forgiving those who have sinned against us just as you have forgiven us. Come, Lord and find us striving to grow in our faith, working it out with fear and trembling at times. Come and find us at work in our little corner among the people you have given us to tend. Come and find us on duty and self-assured by the inner warmth that we are your children. Come and find us spiritually prepared, constantly prepared because we know not the day or the hour.

Suppose we knew when the day would be? Would we live different lives if we knew? How would they be different? One author suggests these things, how we can live in a different way, and it’s Advent and Christmas season wrapped up together, and he says this, “It’s not too early to give some things away this Christmas, not just on Christmas Day, but during all the days leading up to December 25<sup>th</sup>.” Here’s a suggestion. Mandekah. Seek out a forgotten friend now while you can. Dismiss a suspicion. Write a long overdue love note and mail it. Hug someone tightly and whisper “I Love You.” Forgive an enemy. Be gentle and patient with an angry person. Express appreciation.

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Gladden the heart of a child. Find the time to keep a promise. Make or bake something for someone, and give it to them anonymously. Release, let go of a grudge. Just listen for a change. Speak kindly to a stranger. Enter into another’s sorrow. Smile, this is one I could take, even if it hurts your face and it’s unaccustomed to it. I’m trying. Laugh a little more. Take a walk with a friend. Kneel down and pat a dog. Maybe even risk petting a cat. I don’t know. I’m not a cat person, but try. Read a poem or two or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and read it as if you mean it. Lower your demands on others. Play some beautiful music during dinner. Apologize if you were wrong, and you know you were wrong. Turn off the television and talk. Do the dishes for the family, husband. Pray for someone who helped you when you hurt. Give a gentle answer even though you feel like yelling. Encourage an older person. Point out one thing you appreciate most about someone you work with. Offer to baby-sit for a weary mother. Kids, give your teacher a break – cooperate! Make Christmas one long extended gift of ourselves to others without announcement and without obligation or reservation or hypocrisy because this is the Christian faith, and who knows how long we have to show it to one another. Live now! Do not seize the day for self. Give yourself to God by living out your faith with others, by living out your life in the world. In the daily darkness of this world, be the light of Christ, and you will be found ready always! Amen.