

Coming and Going

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 clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather the 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.”

When we were walking the *El Camino* in Spain a couple summers ago, we stayed in a few hostels. One night we were on the third floor gazing out the window when the birds started acting oddly. They were shrieking as they flew frantically around. Some were hopping anxiously on the telephone wires. Others were sneaking under the terracotta roof tiles. What made it odd was there wasn't anything going on. It was a calm weather report, and beautiful evening without a cloud in the sky. So apparently, I surmised, these birds must've had a squabble between themselves. Except, five minutes later the wind picked up, and the darkness rolled in. Lightning flashed and guess what? It started to pour! Nature always knows. Like a sixth sense, they felt the barometric shift in the air. I didn't. They read the signs. I trusted the weather report. During the first week of advent we hear Jesus tell us to “Read the signs. Stay awake. Sense what's coming.”

The truth is, humanity, in general, isn't known for reading the signs. Or if we do we aren't known for doing much of anything about it. We are not a species famous for being preventative. Since the 70's or earlier scientists have told us the earth is warming. In November, we waltzed over the dreaded 2-degree Celsius threshold. Satellites have shown us pictures of the northern and southern poles shrinking. People on Alaskan cruise ships have watched the ice islands floating by them. We've all felt the tragedy of polar bears melting into extinction. The evidence is unequivocal and yet, we don't give it much attention. Or bring it closer to home. The supreme court is currently hearing a case where a domestic assaulter, under the second amendment's rights, can still bear arms. It's during a time when statistics show that guns in domestic violence situations are lethal for everyone—including the officer who responds to the call. It's also after a week when our own Winston Salem community grieves over the lives lost of the WSSU student and the Atkins High School student who were killed by their father. Were the signs there? Or we can talk about health care, or schools, prison reform, or political extremism. The signs are there as well, aren't they. So either we ignore them, or we simply don't see them. After all, the human race is not famous for being preventative, especially when profit is involved.

So Jesus says, “Pay attention. Stay alert. Don’t go to sleep on me. Don’t get too distracted by the chaos in the news. Keep your senses open.” Because the time of his coming will be a bit of a surprise. It could be in the evening, or in midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. But these time stamps of his coming, they are important. Call it a bit of gospel foreshadowing.

Could be in the evening – during the last supper. When Jesus hands himself over as the bread and cup given for us.

Or it could be in the middle of the night – as the disciples fall asleep in the garden and Jesus is arrested and handed over by his betrayer.

Or when the cock crows – as Jesus is handed over in Peter’s denial.

Or at dawn – as Jesus is handed over to Pilate by the chief priests.

You see the surprise: at each time stamp, as Jesus claims is a time when he is coming, it is a moment when he is actually going—being handed over for the sake of waking us up from our slumber. After all he says, “It is like a man *going*...whose coming is a surprise to everyone.” It is a surprise because each and every time he says he could be coming, it is actually during a moment when he is going.

Now if you’re like me, it is a bit of a difficult concept to understand. So maybe we think about Mary. In her saying “yes” to offering her body, her womb, she brought forth an actual coming of God’s presence. And not only for herself, but for all of us. Or think about the Civil Rights leaders, who in their going non-violently—putting their bodies on the line—actually brought forth a coming for all of us by exposing the system’s violence for what it truly is. Or maybe we remember the story of the seventy-five-year-old retired nurse who, during Covid, felt called out of retirement to train nurses in the shortage. She offered herself and, although she died after catching Covid herself, brought forth the coming of many healing hands for everyone in the community, which probably wouldn’t have happened if she didn’t go.

Every time stamp Jesus mentions: in the evening, or the middle of night, or at cockcrow, or at dawn—every one of them is a moment when Jesus is being handed over for the sake of love—for the sake of God’s presence coming to us.

Of course, here’s the other part: in each instance the disciples fail to get it. They fail to understand. At least until they are on the other side of Jesus’ going. After all, humanity often misses the signs. But the hope is always that we can eventually come to see them, even after missing them the first time, or the second, or the third. And it is this—the gospel for the disciples who fail to understand—that makes room for hope’s flickering light—which keeps us going despite our failures, because our going is what keeps God’s hope coming.

In the series *All the Light We Cannot See*—a Netflix show based on the riveting book—it is about a small town in France after Nazi Germany’s occupation in World War II. During the war there was someone who would broadcast illegally from their attic, filling listener’s imaginations with truth and most of all, hope. As the bombs would fall and as SS boots were stomping all over Europe, the voice on the airwaves would say, “Isn’t the world a beautiful place? So why are we destroying it?” It was a lifeline for those whose world was encapsulated in chaos and violence. He was broadcasting hope; igniting a spark which makes it possible to see beyond the darkness.

Maybe they didn't see it. At least not the first time, or the second, or even the third. Not in the evening, or in the middle of the night, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. But hope is there—it's the light we cannot always see.

So what gives you hope this advent season? We are going to take a relational moment and talk with our neighbor for a minute about what gives us hope. For even as the sun is eclipsed, and the moon loses its radiance, and as the stars begin to fall, God's promise is that God's word of hope will never pass away. And that is a light which can never be extinguished, even if we fail to understand it at first, or can't always see it. Amen.