

## Hope In Jesus

*December 3rd, First Advent, Luke Bushman. Mark 13:24-37*

I don't know about you, but growing up, I found these passages about the coming end times extremely distressing. I remember I read Revelation when I was fairly young, which is a very confusing book to me now, with a Biblical Studies degree, so as a kid, it was exceptionally confusing. For example Revelation 6:12-13 says

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind."

The first time I saw a Blood Moon after reading this, I was terrified. I thought, well guess the end of the world is upon us. Blood Moons occur 2-4 times per year apparently, which I wish I would have known as a kid. Passages found in Revelation, and here in Mark are distressing a lot of the time, because the image that is painted seems vengeful and violent. We are 2 000 years removed from these writings, and the apocalyptic genre is used to communicate very different things now, versus then. There interestingly seemed to be a boom in apocalypse fiction in the 2000's. For young adult fiction you had the Hunger Games, Maze Runner and Divergent- all book series that dealt with the apocalypse. These books came out close to each other, and targeted a similar demographic. Our media tends to use apocalypse literature to ask questions about what our downfall might be, and what aspects of society would remain if there was a cataclysmic event. The Hunger Games for example ventures into how the powerful might control the lower classes through violence to avoid potential revolutions. Class divisions remain, but so do love and hope.

What was Jesus trying to communicate in Mark 13? Why did biblical authors use this genre? While we may not find these discussions comforting, apocalyptic literature was used to provide comfort and determination to keep going when things were tough. Jesus is encouraging his followers to keep going when things are scary. Keep your radical love and passion, even when it is scary or dangerous to do so. Unfortunately there is a long history of trying to decode passages like this and the book of Revelation. Using unique imagery to determine when the world is going to end. Taking metaphors for the suffering in the world, and applying them to specific instances. As a very general rule, the Bible is less concerned with fortune telling, as it is with truth telling. The things Jesus describes, and the response he hopes people have could be applied to any number of situations. Is it the end of the world as we know it? The destruction of the temple? With such vague imagery, one could easily argue that Jesus is talking about his own death. These words are not meant to be decoded, but they are meant to encourage. They are meant to promote perseverance.

It is the first Sunday of advent, and you are likely wondering “What does this have to do with Christmas, with the birth of Jesus”. You are not alone, I was initially not sure why the lectionary decided this ominous passage was perfect for getting us in the Christmas spirit. The candle that gets lit this Sunday, is the prophecy candle, better known as the hope candle. Finding hope while we wait can be very difficult. We often hear and feel the sentiment that “Jesus can not come soon enough”. One of our songs this morning was about that very idea. Come Thou Long Expected Jesus. We wait with anticipation for a more peaceful, safe, and loving world. We as believers aren't the only

ones waiting. We are not the first people to wait for something better, and we won't be the last.

The tradition of apocalyptic literature that awaited the coming of God's goodness did not begin with Jesus. While our eyes are immediately drawn to Revelations jarring metaphors about what the return of Jesus will be like, what Jesus is saying in Mark is nothing new. When people are in a crisis, they hope for a savior. When the powers that be are oppressive, people hope for new rulers. When people hope or feel something, they find ways of expressing it, often through writings.

Jewish folks were no strangers to crisis and oppression. We have many writings about the kind of future they hoped for throughout scripture and outside of it. Many of these hopes are visceral expressions of anger. It is unfair to these writings to use them to promote violence. These texts do not necessarily even condone violence, but are a real honest expression of wanting oppressors to be taken out of the picture.

Recently, there was a very modern example of these sentiments that sparked some debate in the media. When I was growing up, there was a show on TV called iCarly, about a group of friends who make a show on the internet. It was a silly show, without too much by way of deeper themes. Unfortunately behind the scenes, things were not silly for all of the actors. Jeannette McCurdy who played the role of Sam on this fun TV show, released a book in 2022 called "I am Glad My Mom Died". I have not read this book, but have heard very good things about it and the basic premise of it. The book is a memoir of Jeannette's life, and her experiences with a very abusive mother who used her own daughter for her gain as she became a child actress. Jeannette did an interview, with Trevor Noah on the Daily Show, where he asked her about the

controversial title, and wondered if she hated her Mom. Jeannette explained that she did not hate her Mom, that she understood her Mom was a nuanced and complicated person, but the title is a reflection of her honest feelings upon hearing that she would no longer have to deal with her abuser. It is an acknowledgement of the relief she felt, and allowing herself to feel that relief. That doesn't mean Jeanette wanted to hurt her Mom, or wished her dead. She just expressed the reality of her feelings, and the feelings of so many others in similar situations.

The Bible is often similar. That is why we have so many intense pieces of scripture, aimed at people's enemies. It doesn't mean Jesus condones violence, it just means that the authors in the Bible felt empowered to express their raw feelings. We see this in the book of Revelation, which was likely written around the time of the temple destruction to give the people hope that Jesus would return. We see this in the book of Daniel, which has very similar imagery to Revelation, and was aimed at giving hope to folks living in exile.

Jesus' participation in this trend is meant to be hopeful. Jesus has his own unique spin in this Mark text, because while the imagery is scary and dark, Jesus does not mention violence at all here. Prior to the arrival of Jesus, there were others who made declarations that they were the Messiah. There were many prophecies that claimed to know the exact signs that would accompany the end of the earth. These declarations were usually tools of manipulation to get more followers, and to radicalize these followers. People still make claims about knowing the end of the world to gain power. And people still attract followers often willing to do their violent bidding by

claiming to be some kind of savior. Jesus here is not trying to gain power, or to claim that he knows when the world is ending. He says “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). Jesus’ message is simply to stay alert about the world around you, and keep the hope alive.

Advent is the season of waiting. We are often waiting for things to turn around in life and in our world. While we are waiting it is easy to be drawn to messages that promise a solution to our problems. All kinds of industries, systems and people in our world have power because they promise to know how to make things better. How to make life easy. How to avoid the crises around us. Jesus pushes back on this. A militant uprising is not going to solve the brokenness in his world. Knowing when God’s redemption will take place will not help make the world a better place. The message is nuanced. There is hope that the world will get better, but we still have to face the reality that we live in a broken world. As we think about the hope candle this advent, we can acknowledge often intense feelings of anger about the situations we find ourselves in. Those feelings are valid. We will likely find ourselves hoping for a solution to make the world better. This is also valid. What is most important however, is that we use all of these feelings to keep on going- even when things are difficult.