

December 3, 2023
The First Sunday of Advent, Year B
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Don't Panic

Three weeks ago, on Sunday, November 19th, I preached a sermon about how Thanksgiving had crept up on me. How it took a phone call from my sister to realize that Thanksgiving was less than 10 days away and we needed to make a plan. Who was hosting, what were we doing?

I consider this sermon to be kind of part two of that sermon. Because you know what happens when you're not ready for Thanksgiving? You're also not ready for Christmas. It creeps up on you. When stores start decorating for Christmas the day after Halloween or before, it becomes background noise, that tells you nothing about the proximity of the holiday, until it's too late, until you're in crisis mode because what seemed to be so far away is actually upon you.

Christmas is actually not far away at all. In fact, it's only 21 days away, and I, who apparently have been pushed by circumstances or denial, to be baffled by how calendars work, find myself here, on the third of December in a bit of a Christmas panic. So, perhaps I should take comfort in the fact that our scripture readings for today don't seem to be ready for Christmas either.

Outside of these walls, Christmas music is blaring, lights are everywhere (except at the pastor's house—working on it), trees are decorated, winter as we haven't seen it for a few years, is being celebrated, with songs about snowmen and sleighs and jingle bells, dashing through the snow, and in some settings and some circles Jesus is being talked about and sung about far more publicly and far more often than he is throughout most of the year. But within the walls of the church, where, Jesus should be and, hopefully, is, the center of everything, our readings

don't seem to have gotten the memo that we should be getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birthday.

Because who do we find in our gospel reading for today, but Jesus, fully grown, and not talking about anything Christmasy at all. We're not hearing about stables or shepherds or angels or wise men. We're hearing about the end of the world. Happy birthday? Merry Christmas?

Our gospel reading for today comes from the 13th chapter of Mark and if we back up a little bit into the 13th chapter of Mark, it doesn't get any better. The chapter starts with Jesus talking with his disciples about the destruction of the Temple, about wars and violence, about false prophets and false messiahs, leading people astray, about natural disasters, about persecutions and suffering. It is not cheerful stuff.

But it does feel close to home. We don't need Jesus to tell us that there will come a time when there will be wars and suffering. We don't need Jesus to tell us that there will come a time when beloved, once seemingly invincible institutions will come crashing down. We don't need Jesus to tell us that there will come a time when false prophets and false messiahs would abound. We don't need Jesus to tell us about famines and earthquakes and disasters. We see it all and with our own eyes.

I used to think that every generation thinks that they are living in the end times because they can't imagine the world going on without them, but now I think that every generation thinks that it's living in the end times because every generation sees what we have seen, what we are seeing, And yet, for each generation it seems uniquely horrible, uniquely catastrophic, uniquely earth shattering. How human beings, how can the world survive such a time as this, with the weight of human suffering and all of creation groaning under the weight of human sin?

None of this is festive. None of this is fun. Where are the reindeer? Where are the snowflakes? Where are the elves? Where are the stockings and trees? Where

is the baby, who is supposed to, at least in our circles, be the center of all of this Christmas hoopla?

None of this is going to help me get in the Christmas spirit, none of this is going to help me get into Christmas gear.

In fact, today's gospel reading, and even Old Testament reading, feel like just more of the same, more of the same crisis mode that we could get if we turn on cable news. Apocalypse now.

Weirdly, I find that kind of comforting. Of course, I don't take comfort in the suffering of the world or the brokenness of the world. I take comfort in the fact that what we are experiencing as uniquely horrifying is not new. It has been a sad part of the human experience since the beginning of time. The comfort in that is in the fact is that people have endured, in every time and every generation, and that is what we are called to do. We are called, not to turn a blind eye, not to ignore or shut down our capacity for compassion, or cover the needs of the world with tinsel, but also not to feed the human taste for panic and crisis. We are called to endure with hope.

The place where I want to find myself in response to the state of the world and in response to our readings for today and even in response to the proximity of Christmas, is in our reading from First Corinthians.

I find that I don't often preach from the epistles. That's probably because they often don't tell a story like the gospel readings do and they aren't located within the grand scope of history like the Old Testament readings sometimes are. Instead, they are simply about a community of people, from different backgrounds and life experiences, trying to find their way as a community, living out their faith in Jesus Christ, no matter what is going on around them.

But today, I think that that is exactly where we need to find ourselves. Comforted and strengthened by the words of Paul, hearing them today as if they are words intended for us, as individuals, as households and families, and especially

as a congregation, as people who gather together to learn and live our faith and to worship Jesus Christ.

Because the grace of God has been poured out on us. Just as Paul says. And we have the spiritual gifts that we need to live lives of faith in our time. And we have the hope that is promised to us, by the grown-up Jesus, just days before his crucifixion, that the Son of Man will come in power and glory and will gather us all into his arms. We have the promise of the reign of God, where justice and peace and joy will prevail.

Together we are called to keep awake! To be alert to where God is and what God is doing in the world, and what God wants us to be doing in the world. But being awake doesn't mean being in a panic. We are called to be alert and ready, but also to be calm and comforted. For the Lord has given us what we need for such a time as this. We have each other. We have Jesus' presence in word and sacrament and community and in the deep stillness of prayer and in the amazing intimacy of those God moments that come to us when we're least expecting them. And one day, Jesus will come, will be revealed to us in the fullness of his power and his glory and his lovingkindness. That day, not Christmas day, is the day that today's Advent readings are getting us ready for.

Getting ready looks like this:

- Keeping our eyes open, for signs of God's presence in the world.
- Keeping our ears open, to the cries of the suffering around us, not so that we crumble under their needs, but so that we can use the gifts that God has given us, to help where we can and where we are called.
- Keeping our hearts open, as we trust in the promises and presence of God made known to us in the here and now, as we wait for the fulfillment of all of God's promises to us and to the world on that day that no one knows

It is Advent. And it doesn't matter how many days there are until Christmas. For in spite of the world around us, that's not what Advent is about. It is Advent. And this is what Advent is about. Don't panic. Keep awake! For Christ is coming.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.