

“What are we waiting for ?!?”

Mark 13:15-22, 24-32

www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=mark+13:15-22; 24-32

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What you've just heard is, in part, one of the Lectionary's readings for the First Sunday in Advent, the season that is the beginning of the church year- happy new year, everybody!

If you're not familiar with the Lectionary, it's a three year cycle of Scriptural readings shared by many churches that does something I think is very beautiful- it keeps Christians all around the world, with many different understandings of the faith, in at least some kind of harmonic union. What someone reads in the Lutheran church down the street on a given Sunday, they are also reading in the Presbyterian church across town and will be reading again three hours later in churches in California. Given the squabbling that can happen among the different denominations- or even within some of them- I think using the Lectionary, at least some of the time, is a pretty good thing.

In this passage, Jesus is in Jerusalem, and knows he is traveling toward his terrible crucifixion and death. And, as you heard, he is talking to his disciples about when he will be coming back- the End Times, when after a terrifying period of universal misery and suffering, when time and history end, when all things as we know them cease. Jesus has just told them that these things we know- Time, Creation itself- will end, and end ferociously. And it all gives way to absolute darkness- the sun and moon between them will not have one single photon left to give. Then, then, Jesus arrives on clouds, in glory. And Judgement follows. Capital J.

Ho, ho, ho?

What does this have to do with Advent? Well, the nerd-alert alarms went off, the plastic pocket protector went into place, and out I went, polling the people closest to me, asking, and “What do you think of when you think about Advent?”

- My daughter thought of Advent calendars, and the little pieces of chocolate behind each tiny door. She also thought of the large, Advent wreath that was suspended from the ceiling at our former church.
- My husband thought of that Advent ring we had at home, and singing and lighting the candles each night. He, too, remembered the ring at our old church, and the lovely song we sang there every Advent season.
- My best friend, who works in very high-end sales (I can't even afford third-quality merchandise from them- I am not joking: I am afraid to breath when I walk in her shop) thought of the rising tension throughout the season and the relief when Christmas finally arrives.
- My brother thinks about buying presents (not from my best friend!) because he really likes pleasing people and showing them love in this way.

While I may be the supreme geek, my family and friends are fairly normal people, and I think their thoughts about Advent can't be too different from most folks. The passage from Mark doesn't bring to mind any of their 1st Century Advent experiences. And if you'll take my nerdly word for it, neither do any of the other readings the Lectionary sets out in its three year cycle.

What the Lectionary does is hold in tension the historical, Old Testament expectation of a Messiah and Creation's expectation- our expectation- of the End Times. They aren't all that different, when you think about them- there is a beautiful symmetry there, since we are waiting for the same thing, aren't we?

Aren't we?

What are we waiting for?

What were the people of the Old Testament waiting for? I went to the Bible itself and then into the many commentaries and scholarly articles you can find, if you are foolish enough to go looking.

Under tolerant foreign rulers, like the Egyptian Ptolemies, the ancient Hebrews imagined that the Messiah would be very much like an ideal man. During these times, they were waiting for a man like David, or like an angel.

Under more oppressive rule, as at the time of the revolt led by Judas Maccabee against a Seleucid ruler who banned Jewish religious practice, the dream of the Messiah changed. At times like those, the Jewish people waited for mighty, royal messiahs, or authoritative priestly messiahs, or maybe royal and priestly messiahs rolled up together.

Still later, some Hebrews living under Roman rule show in their writing that they were waiting for a non-military, yet liberating messiah, while others were waiting for a judge-king-and-Son of Man rolled into one big bundle. Others were clearly not waiting for a political messiah.

Some, some were waiting an apocalypse-right-now messiah, heavenly king, judge, warrior, man descending from the sky, right-now-today to punish Rome. The Scarii were men like this, waiting for a divine warrior king they could follow. They got him a few years later- Simon bar Kochba was not God, he wasn't even Aragorn (if you are familiar with The Lord of the Rings). God can create life; Aragorn could heal with an herb called kings-foil: bar Kochba and his followers could only die by their own hands to avoid death at Roman hands.

Really, there was only one person who knew, bone deep, blood deep, what they were waiting for- and what we are waiting for. At least, what I think we should be waiting for, in our minds- what I think we should be contemplating.

What were they waiting for?

They were waiting for a baby.

Not a Kohein, a Jewish priest who could use God's Name, when no one else could.

Not a David.

Not an angel.

Not a king-on-earth or a judge for their oppressors. Not vengeance-in-a-box.

A baby- a mewling little newborn, too weak to lift its head, or move its own floppy limbs.

A baby- completely helpless. Can't even maintain its body temperature. Have to check them all the time, keep them close.

Did you ever hold one, just out of the womb? Some can barely open their eyes. If you're a mother, if you breast fed on, you know that they are so helpless, they can't even do that without help- you have to teach them.

But, why?

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe

עֲשֵׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית

oseh ma'asei v'reishit

Who does the work of Creation

Why did *he* The Master of the Universe who did the work of Creating everything that is, why did he **choose** to come to us in this weak, helpless, form? He could have been the Priest, he could have been the Davidic King- he could have been the Angel, or Warrior-God, dancing death upon Rome.

But he chose to be this mewling newborn in a Palestinian backwater.

So that we would know not to be afraid of him. Not then, and not forever after. He came in this most helpless form of humanity to show his love for us by shedding every element of God-hood humans might imagine- so we might think of those little fingers, and as he grew those chubby hands. I'll be they got grubby, sometimes, like other chubby little hands.

Think about this. We know he was born, like any other baby. We know at twelve he was brilliant, because he impressed the teachers in the Temple, teaching them instead of the other way around. We don't know anything about the time between. Is it possible that it's because he lived those years as an ordinary little boy, being one of us?

There are many kinds of relationships in human life. My loving relationships with my daughter, my granddaughter, my husband- all my loving relationships have one thing in common, one firm basis: we are not afraid of each other. I have been in relationships in which I have been afraid, and they are not the same- they do not grow into healthy places, like plants grow toward the sunlight. The "love," if it can be called that, was tinged a sickly color. Believe me, these people had no interest in allowing themselves to be vulnerable to me. Yet God, Eloheinu, Adonai- became more completely helpless in his mother's arms than he was on the cross. In John, he tells us nobody takes my life from me, I lay down my life. At birth, he couldn't tell Mary anything at all. Just as we must trust him completely, so did he have to trust her. (And Joseph, when his little newborn senses finally figured out someone else was there!)

So- now what do we do, over the next four weeks? Well, I'd say- pick up that Baby. He may need his diaper changed, and he's probably hungry- and maybe he's given you something to think about. Maybe think about babies in the world who need you if they are going to see their next meal or next sunrise. It seems to have been very important to God that he come to the ancients, and to all people, in the gentlest, most unassuming, reassuring way possible. I think that holds deeper meaning than all the candles, carols, gifts, and pretty trees in the world.

Amen.