

***Maranatha, Lord Messiah -- Come!***

Mark 13:24-37

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I love a lot of things about the Christmas season. I love the festive decorations. I love the general feeling of cheer and goodwill that you see in people this time of the year. I love seeing the excitement and anticipation of the little children as the day draws near when they get to open the presents.

But there's one thing I generally dread every year, and that is the first Sunday of Advent. I dread it because every year the gospel lesson deals, not with the warm and cuddly image of a baby born in a barn and tenderly laid in a manger lined with straw, but with the troubling and sometimes violent image of the second coming of Christ. Of all the mysteries of the Bible, one that gives me the most trouble is the second coming. Maybe it's because of all the strange visions found in the book of Revelation. Maybe it's because of all the arguments over issues like the rapture or the tribulation, and the timing of Jesus' return.

And so I generally dread having to preach on the first Sunday of Advent. Somehow it feels incongruous to be talking about things like the darkening of the sun and the stars falling out of the sky when I would like to set the mood for the season by talking about the bright star that shone over Bethlehem to guide the wise men. Somehow it seems to dampen the mood of the season when we have to talk about not being caught sleeping on the job rather than visions of sugarplums dancing through our heads.

Yet the truth is Advent is not so much a preparation for Christmas, as it is a preparation for Christ. Advent is not so much anticipation of the birth of our Savior, as it is an expectation that our Messiah will come and redeem a world that is broken and hurt. The truth is Advent is the time when we experience the tension between the joy of knowing that God came to us in Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sin, and the sobering reminder that we're not there yet, that our world is still hurting.

The cry that is oft repeated in various ways during Advent is Come, Lord Jesus! That phrase is the English translation of a one-word Greek transliteration of the Aramaic word, "maranatha." Interestingly enough, in the Aramaic the word may be written as "marana tha", which means "Come, Our Lord," or "maran atha", which means, "Our Lord has come." And thus even in the ambiguity of the Aramaic, we sense the tension in the way we observe Advent, for isn't it true that we are waiting for the One who has already come? During Advent we acknowledge that in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God has acted to redeem a sinful humanity; yet still we look ahead to the final fulfillment of that redemption.

Marana-tha, Lord Messiah: Come!

The description in Mark's gospel of the day when we "will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory"<sup>1</sup> falls into the literary category of apocalyptic literature. Throughout history--and certainly this is also the case in the biblical examples--apocalyptic literature has arisen during times of

social and political crises. And so given the current economic and political situation in our world today, it would seem that this “little apocalypse” in today’s gospel lesson is especially timely.

You see, apocalyptic literature contains the elements of good versus evil, of pessimism given the current situation, and of a sense of the imminence that the end may be near. Certainly it would not be a stretch to say that such is the mood in our world today: conflict against terrorism, a spiraling economy with gloomy short-term forecasts of further hardships and increased unemployment, and the sense that it would be hard to imagine things getting worse.

The time is ripe for something dramatic to awaken our faith.

Advent begins with a cry for help. It begins with the most basic of prayers: Maranatha, Lord Messiah--Come! Come and help us, O God. Come, and do something to fix the broken world we inhabit. On this first Sunday of Advent, we join our hearts with Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...” On this first Sunday in Advent we are reminded that Advent is about a longing for redemption and salvation, that Advent is about hope for a world restored to the way God first created it.

And that hope must come from God. Maranatha, Lord Messiah--Come! Open the heavens and come down. That is the prayer of Advent: Come, Lord Jesus! It is the prayer that should flow over our lips every time we read about yet another suicide bombing in Baghdad, killing dozens of innocent civilians; or when we see images like the horrible attacks that just this past week took place in India: Come, Lord Jesus! It is the prayer that should flow over our lips every time we get discouraged that greed and selfishness and violence seem to have the upper hand against justice and peace and compassion: Come, Lord Jesus! It is the prayer that should flow over our lips on behalf of those we love who are diagnosed with cancer or who face unthinkable physical obstacles every day or who suddenly find themselves unemployed or whose spouse has just walked away: Come, Lord Jesus! It is the prayer that should flow over our lips when we are sitting on the couch with our belts loosened because we have just feasted, and across the television screen is shown the image of a homeless man waiting in line for a bowl of soup and a warm place to spend the night: Come, Lord Jesus!

Maranatha, Lord Messiah: Come! John Buchanan calls this the “deepest yearning of the human heart: the wanting, the needing, the waiting with which every one of us is intimately familiar.”<sup>2</sup>

And it is to people who cry out for the Messiah to come that Jesus speaks in today’s gospel lesson. Jesus’ words are not meant to give us a blueprint by which we can predict the day and hour of his return; in fact, Jesus reminds us that no one knows the hour, and so it is counterproductive even to try to guess. But Jesus does encourage us to wait and watch for his return. It is not a passive waiting that Jesus urges, as if we are sitting idly at the curbside with our suitcase, looking at our watch and wondering when the bus is going to come. Instead, it is an active waiting in which we are to continue faithfully living as God’s people.

The kind of waiting and watchfulness that Jesus urges is a call to live into our identity as the children of God. In 1 Thessalonians Paul declares that we are “children of the light and children of the day.”<sup>3</sup> He then goes on to urge us to live into the light, not the darkness. When Jesus tells us to stay awake, to be watchful in our waiting, he is telling us to live into who we are. Don’t worry about how soon or late the final day might come--just live in a state of preparedness, live faithfully into your calling as children of God.

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Watch and wait. Pay attention to the world around you. Look for Christ, and live in the way you want Christ to find you should he return right away. Don't let the busy-ness of the season drown out your attentiveness.

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At the first church I served as pastor, in the small town of Cleveland, North Carolina, there was an elderly homebound member named Mr. Souther. He was a sweet, gentle man, who loved the Lord and who missed being able to come to the church. Mr. Souther lived out in the country (which wasn't far from the town, because the town was out in the country!). The highway bordered his front yard, and about the same distance behind the house bordering his back yard was the railroad track. Once when I was visiting Mr. Souther, I remarked to him that it must be hard to live so close to both a noisy highway with big trucks passing through at all times, and to the railroad tracks, with the trains coming through regularly, including late at night. And his response was, "Well, after a while you get used to the noise, so you don't even notice it anymore."

Sometimes the familiarity of the Advent season has that effect on us. We expect things like the lighting of the candles and the beautiful Christmas decorations throughout the church this time of the year. The celebrations have become so much a part of our routine that they are just that--routine. Amidst the cacophony of calls to get ready for Christmas, it's easy to miss the appearance of Christ in our midst. "Like people who have lived by the train tracks for years, we no longer hear the sound of the train. After years in church, we get used to the noise of Advent, to the coming of Christ, so much so that we no longer notice it."<sup>4</sup>

Stay awake, says Jesus. Watch for my coming, and be ready.

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I remember hearing the story of a community that was going through a severe drought. The local pastor announced that one evening there would be a prayer meeting to pray for rain. That evening the church was full, with people standing in the aisles and the foyer. But when the pastor went up to the pulpit, he looked out over the congregation, and he said, "This prayer meeting is cancelled. We were supposed to come and pray for rain, but not one of you even thought to bring an umbrella with you. Where is your faith?!"

At Advent, the most basic prayer that we can utter is, Lord Jesus, Come! But to pray that prayer with faith means that we will live each day faithfully into our calling as children of God. And we will be watchful, eagerly awaiting the return of the Lord. So go ahead and utter that prayer--Maranatha, Lord Messiah! But when our Lord returns, may he find that our prayers were more than just words uttered from our lips; indeed, may he find every one of us living faithfully, worshiping him, praising him, serving him, and loving one another as he commanded us before he left.

Maranatha, Lord Messiah--Come!

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 13:26

<sup>2</sup> John Buchanan, "Dear God, Help!", November 20, 2005, [www.fourthchurch.org/sermons.html](http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons.html)

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:5

<sup>4</sup> Lillian Daniel, in David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 22.