

Struggling to be Bearers of Hope

Mark 13:24-37

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1st Sunday of Advent

A few minutes ago we lit the first candle of Advent, declaring that this candle is for all God's people struggling to be bearers of hope in a troubled world. What does it mean to be a bearer of hope in a troubled world?

All we have to do is turn on any news channel, open any newspaper, check out any internet news site to see that there is lots of trouble in our world — death dealing disease, burglaries and thefts, shootings and sexual assaults, the ongoing tragedy in Ferguson, Missouri. We don't even have to turn on the news to know there's trouble in our lives — illness and injuries, loss of loved ones, uncertainty and anxiety about the future. In the midst of all that and more, what does it mean to be a bearer of hope? What is hope?

Hope is defined an optimistic attitude of mind based on the expectation of positive outcomes. Hope is future-oriented and grounded in reality. Hope is proactive. It invests time, energy and passion in order to bring about future desired outcomes. The Bible says, hope is one of the greatest spiritual gifts that together with faith and love “abides” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Faith, hope and love abide — they are long lasting, enduring gifts of the spirit that have the power to transform troubled lives and a troubled world.

Today's Gospel lesson is about hope — and wishes. Wishes are different than hope in three important ways. (1) Wishes are not time sensitive, they can be the future like hope, but they can also be for things in the past and the present. (2) Wishes are not grounded in reality. (3) Wishes are passive not proactive. I wish I was five and half feet tall, but I cannot hope to be five and half feet tall. Wishes and hopes are different. We are called to be bearers of hope, not wishes, in a trouble world.

Today's Scripture reading introduces us to the Gospel of Mark, our primary text for the coming year. We begin our reading of Mark in the close to the end (chapter thirteen of fifteen). It is the final week of Jesus' life and ministry in ancient Judea. As he and his disciples were leaving the massive temple complex, Jesus told them that the temple would be destroyed: “not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down” (13:2). Once they are settled back in their encampment on the Mount of Olives, across the valley from the Temple, the disciples ask Jesus, “when will this be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished” (13:4). Jesus explains that no historical and political upheavals, not even natural catastrophes should be regarded as signs of the end. Such events are simply part of the process of bringing forth new life, like the labor pains that accompany the birth of every child (13:5-23). He warns the disciples to beware of people who make messianic claims and perform miracles to back up their claims (13:5-6, 21-23).

In today's reading, Jesus talks about the coming of the Son of Man on clouds in the midst of a cosmic upheaval in which sun and moon stop shining and the stars fall from the sky (13:24-27). This was a relatively new idea in the Judaism of Jesus' time — the notion of God sending a man from heaven to rescue God's people from suffering and oppression. Jesus follows this up with an analogy from the fig tree: when it puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near (13:

28-29). Jesus' point is that when you see the Son of Man coming on the clouds you will know that he is already at the gates. In other words, when you see it happening, you will know that it is happening.¹

Jesus' assertion that "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (13:30) sometimes troubles readers today. Since hundreds of generations have passed away and the Son of Man has not yet come, it seems as if Jesus might have been wrong about this. If, however, Jesus was talking about the destruction of the temple (remember — that was the original question), then he got it right. Many in Jesus' audience were still alive when Mark wrote his gospel in the midst of the war that destroyed the temple.

There is yet another possible interpretation. Every other time that Jesus uses the phrase "this generation" he is referring to unbelieving, sinful people (8:12, 38; 9:19). So it could be that Jesus is saying we will never be rid of unbelieving, sinful people until that day when heaven and earth pass away.² Since no one, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son know when that day will be (13: 32), Jesus urges his followers to beware, to keep alert, to stay awake as they go about doing the work they have been called to do (13:33-37).

The reality is that there will always be people whose words, actions and lives bring pain and suffering to others. And all too often we will be those people whose words and actions hurt others. Jesus asks us to consider our response to that reality. Are we dreaming of some kind of supernatural, heavenly rescuer swooping in on the clouds with an army of angels to gather us up and whisk us away to some other reality free of trouble and pain? Or are we dreaming of a world where cures are found for death-dealing diseases, a world where every person is treated with dignity and respect regardless of skin color, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship, religious affiliation, or ability? Is following Jesus in this troubled world about wishing or hoping?

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus acknowledges our inclination for wishful thinking, our longing for a heavenly rescuer to get us out of the mess we are in. Jesus turns us away from that inclination, and points us instead to hopeful action. Jesus instructs us to carry on with our work and our responsibilities but with with a special focus. He tells us to be beware, to keep alert, to keep awake for his coming at any moment — in the evening, at midnight, in the early hours, at sunrise — in other words when we least expect it.

Christ first came among us long ago as the baby in the manger — the firstborn son of a poor unwed mother, a child of working-class refugees in a war torn land, a boy growing up in a rural backwater, a young man earning his bread as a day-laborer, a friend of the down and out, a healer of the sick, a prophet challenging the ruling authorities, a weary leader welcoming a foot massage, a master washing his disciples' feet, the eternal Son of God emptying himself to go to the cross. In this Advent season, we are called to be alert and to look for the coming of this one in our midst. Where will we see him? How will we meet him?

¹ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel*, (Smyth and Helwys, 2000), p. 137.

² Brian Stoffregen, "Mark 13.24-37, Advent 1 - Year B," at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark13x24.htm>.

Please pray with me:

Christ, you are the light and the hope of the world. Open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to see you where and when we least expect it. Help us to be attentive to the needs and vulnerabilities of those around us. Give us the courage to be honest about our own brokenness, and the humility to receive your mercy. Empower us to be bearers of hope in a troubled world. Amen.