

A Season of Hope, A People of Hope
November 29, 2020 Pastor Jonna
Mark 13:24 – 31

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Welcome to Advent! Settle in and stay awhile. Cozy up to the deep purples and blues of Advent, the colors of royalty. Sing the songs of the season, praying that Jesus would come and prepare room in *your* heart. See the flickering candles, **(picture)** first one, then two, three, then all four. Four candles, lit this time every year, symbols hope, love, joy, and peace.

Welcome to Advent, this time of *unyielding hope* in a season of encroaching darkness. As the shortest day of the year approaches, *we* light candles, this seemingly silly thing to do amidst the bright lights of Christmas in a technological age.

This ancient Christian tradition is simple and *profound*. As the seasons change and the days become darker and darker, the church *remembers* and celebrates the *first* advent, the coming of God to earth in human flesh as a *baby*. As the days become darker, the church celebrates that there is yet *another* advent that will one day be here, the *second* advent of Jesus, when he will make all things that have been broken, *whole*, and all who believe in him will be with him *forever*.

This season of hope could *not* come at a better time. According to a recent JAMA Network Open study of mental health among U.S. adults, **(graph)** depression symptoms have *tripled* since the Coronavirus Pandemic began. Those who have been at greatest risk are those with “lower income, less than \$5,000 in savings, and having exposure to more stressors.”¹ In a recent Barna Group study of pastors’ mental and emotional well-being **(graph)**, 31% responded

¹ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2770146>

that their well-being was “average,” 18% “below average,” and 2% “poor.”² In a Google search of “depression” and “COVID-19,” the first result was a red triangle (picture) with an exclamation mark, and ways to cope from the CDC.³

This season has been *incredibly costly*. And if you are depressed or are experiencing depressive symptoms, you are *not* alone. *Please* seek the help of a trusted friend or trained counselor. You do *not* have to go through this alone. There *is* hope, and there *is* help.

We are all *desperate* for hope – a real and *lasting* hope, a hope that is neither circumstantial nor based on our efforts. We are desperate for a hope that is *beyond* us, *stronger* than us, a hope that is *guaranteed*. *This* is why the church celebrates Advent *every* year, to remind one another that we have a *sure* and *certain* hope.

One of my favorite things to do as a preacher is to preach the difficult and confusing texts of Scripture. And lo and behold! Our first Advent text is Mark 13, one of the most difficult chapters in Scripture! Our reading begins with verse 24, but taking a look at chapter 13 as a whole, will really help us make sense of it.

Jesus has left the temple with his disciples, when one of them comments on its *massive stones*. This might seem silly, but if you’ve ever been to Jerusalem and have seen the massive stones (**picture**) that *continue* to support where the temple once stood, trust me – you will be impressed! You *too* will comment on the massive stones! Jesus replies, (**verse**) “Not one stone here will be left on another; *every one* will be thrown down” (Mk 13:2b).

² <https://www.barna.com/research/christians-relational-health/>

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https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&ei=uqC1X8WSBcHB0PEPo5y2qAE&q=depression+and+covid+19&oq=depression+and+covid+19&gs_lcp=CgZwc3ktYWlQA1AAWABg1hloAHAAeACAAQCIQCSAQCYAQcQAQdnd3Mtd2l6&scient=psy-ab&ved=0ahUKEwjF1_3dko3tAhXBIDQIHSoODRUQ4dUDCAw&uact=5

Jesus' disciples naturally want to know more. They ask him *when* the temple will be destroyed and *what sign* will be given so that they will have sufficient warning. They are curious and want to be prepared.

Jesus warns them to *watch out!* so that no one deceives them. There will be many who say that they are God, and many will be deceived. There will be *chaos* – wars, earthquakes, famines, family betrayal leading to death, and persecution. The disciples will be *hated* because of their fidelity to Jesus. When the abomination that causes desolation stands where it does not belong, *everyone* is to flee to the mountains. So, *watch out!*

There is a lot here, and it *is* confusing. Many scholars, like a former seminary professor of mine, believe that Mark 13 is confusing for a few reasons. One, throughout his Gospel, Mark *likes* being mysterious. **(statement)** He is *not* direct and obvious as, say, the Gospel of Luke. Two, Mark very well may have written his Gospel before 70 A.D., **(statement)** before the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. If he wrote *prior* to 70 A.D., he wouldn't have had the luxury of hindsight – being able to organize what happened first, second, third, and so on. In contrast, when Luke describes this same destruction, it seems a lot clearer and more chronological; he likely wrote later. Third, this chapter is apocalyptic, **(statement)** a style of writing that we are unfamiliar with.

Mark 13 is difficult, but it's *not* impossible. His disciples ask about the destruction of the temple, and Jesus paints a picture about that destruction, but he *doesn't* give a specific sign or time. He repeats the warning that they are to *watch out!*, to be on guard, but he doesn't tell them to watch *for* anything specific. There is *no* specific sign.

What comes *closest* to a sign is in verse 14 **(verse)**: “‘When you see ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it does not belong – let the reader understand – then let

those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” Even *this* sign is unclear; we are unsure what this is. Some believe this abomination may have been an idol in the temple. Whatever this is, it is a sign for them to flee to the mountains.

The temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed in 70 A.D., a handful of decades after Jesus prophesied their destruction. But what about his return? What about the End? In verse 32, Jesus claimed that even *he* didn't know when he would return. He knew that it would happen after the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem, but how soon after? He had no idea. He could return right then and there, or he could return at some future time. He didn't know when he'd return, but he wanted his disciples to be ready.

And how were they to be ready? How were they to be prepared? They *weren't* to be watching for signs or to be waiting for a specific time in history, but they were to be *discerning* and *steadfast*. They *weren't* to fall for false teachers or to be alarmed by destruction.

Jesus told them in verse 13 (**verse**), “All men will hate you because of me, but he who [endures] to the end will be saved.” Not the coziest encouragement, and definitely *not* an easy sell. *All men will hate you because of me, but he who endures to the end will be saved?* Holy cow! *Who* would want to sign up for that kind of life? You and I want to be loved, appreciated, successful, secure, and influential, not *hated*! What a terrible sermon! Surely, everyone will run away and *never* come back! I would *so* much rather hear Jesus say, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And they will be kind right back atcha! You will live a long life filled with happiness and everything your heart desires!”

But friends, Jesus *never* says this in Scripture. Instead, he says things like, (**verse**) “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matt

16:24 – 25). And, (**verse**) “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:43 – 45).

This life is *not* why we endure. We *do* not endure hardships because we trust that soon, life will be back to normal. We *do* not endure hardships because we believe that God will then owe us good things. We *do* not endure hardships because others will commend us for our strength of character. We *do* not endure for *anything* that we might gain on this side of eternity.

We endure because we are a *people of hope*. We have a *sure* and *certain hope* that Jesus *will* fulfill his promise. We endure with hope, because he *will* come back; he *will* have a *second* advent. He *will* restore what’s been broken, and will do away with the devil, evil, and the sin that separates us from one another. He will do away with systems that exploit, and will establish his kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. He will do away with pandemics, chaos, and death. He will heal all things. He will set all things right.

We are a *people of hope*, so we endure *whatever* comes. We are *not* surprised or caught off guard when hardships come, because we know that our “momentary troubles are achieving for us an *eternal* glory that *far* outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Cor 4:17 – 18).

We are a *people of hope*, lighting candles in the darkness, praying that Jesus would prepare our hearts for him.