

As We Wait
Mark 13: 24 – 37

Keep awake! Watch and wait.

Like so many others we've read in the past eight months, our Bible text speaks to us with a new energy in the midst of this pandemic. We all know what it's like to wait – to wait expectantly, but it's been rare that we have had such a communal experience of it.

We've all been waiting.

For the time when we can give a hug to our loved ones.

For the ability to gather with teachers and fellow students in a classroom.

To dance together at prom.

To play with friends.

To attend a wedding.

To sing in a choir.

To commute to the office..... the one in the city, not to our computer in the dining room.

We've been waiting for a vaccine.

We've been waiting for election results, for political fights to be over and done.

We've been waiting for justice, for fair employment, for there to be enough for everyone to eat, for a safe home for everyone to live in.

We've been waiting. We've been waiting.

Perhaps this shared communal experience of living through hard times, our mutual longing for relief, for normalcy, for safety and security and wholeness puts us in a more sympathetic mindset of the people who first heard this gospel text.

These verses come to us from what's known as the "Markan Apocalypse." It's framed as a farewell discourse from Jesus to his followers shortly before his death, and so the author sets this chapter as an Apocalyptic writing, foretelling a time of great suffering. As we have heard in prior sermons, this kind of writing is not an "end of the world" prophecy of global catastrophe, but a form of poetry and dramatic symbolism that conveys a message to a troubled people – a message of hope and promise of God's faithfulness in the midst of crisis and pain. One commentary describes it as "an extravagant, evocative vision of hope when all hope seems lost."ⁱ

This gospel, written decades after the life of Jesus, was written to followers whose lives were filled with anxiety, fear, tension, vulnerability, and uncertainty about the future. Their world had been shaken to the core. Roman armies had brutally defeated a revolt, the city was burned, the Jewish Temple destroyed. In that destruction was the end of religious life as they knew it. We can feel but a glimpse of that desolation, restricted as we are, from our religious life together in our own church. It's destabilizing. It's bewildering. We feel bereft. We feel afraid. We feel

alone. These past few months have brought chaos and crisis to our lives in countless ways, as it has brought grief and loss and hardship to the entire world. If it brings you any comfort, today is the first day in the new church year. It comes amidst a time of crisis in our communal life. It comes at a time when we are feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, uncertain and unprepared.

And yet, Advent begins in the same simple and profound way each year. We light a candle in the darkness. A candle of hope.

Mark's congregation heard a message of hope in these verses, in the stories of a fig tree, of a master going on a journey. For once, they are parables that are not very difficult to understand. Jesus tells his followers about a fig tree: each year when it ripens, you know that summer comes. Just as you can count on the certainty of the changing of the season, so too you can count on him. Do you remember what this past spring was like for us? We had the government shut-downs, everything was closed, we were instructed to stay home. And at that very time.... the trees began to bud, and then to bloom. It's an easily-visible message of reassurance and hope. And the servants following the instructions of the master? Of course. This, too, was familiar to Mark's hearers. When the master tells the servants to do their work and sets the doorkeeper to watch, there is no question that the master will return. Jesus' disciples have jobs to do! Do them reliably; do them well. And keep watch because the master is coming back --- and they don't need to know when that is to fulfill faithfully their own charge and responsibilities.

We wait.... we wait in the midst of pain and uncertainty for a hopeful future. But we wait knowing and trusting in the promises of God. And so we do our work as faithful servants. We share the good news! We work to feed the hungry. We expend our energy and intelligence in transforming unjust systems. We welcome the stranger. Heal the sick. We support one another and bear each other's burdens. We make sacrifices on behalf of one another, caring for our community in ways large and small.

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter of encouragement to the church in Corinth. I want to share a bit of it from the translation by Eugene Peterson called The Message: (1 Cor 1:4-9)

Just think – you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.

As you wait expectantly, God is right alongside you.

We learned in a new way this past week, how much we long for the presence of a loved one, particularly at our tables. The chairs at our Thanksgiving tables were

filled by those young adults who waited in hours-long testing lines so they could return to their families without risk of infecting them. Some chairs were empty as choices were made to stay home, to limit our gatherings, to sacrifice time together now so that we could be alive for next year's celebrations. We gave thanks for the gift of eating together with family members despite being cooped up with them the past eight months. And we cried, for those whose chairs will be never again be filled.

We discovered again that our celebrations were about food that is more than a meal. It's about relationships. About being nourished by the presence of one another. And so it is at God's table, this table, where Jesus Christ is both guest and host.

It is here that we gather as we wait. To be nourished and fed.

At this table, we share in the company of one another, near and far.

We gather with all the saints – “the quick (the living) and the dead.”

It is here that we remember Jesus sharing his life, his ministry with his trusted friends.

It is Jesus present among us, inviting us to the feast.

It is Jesus proclaimed and awaited until we eat together in the kingdom, and “the kingdom will be on earth, as it is in heaven.”

My favorite feel-good story of the week was about Rocky --- the tiny Saw-whet owl who was accidently imported to New York City on the tree that is going up in Rockefeller Center. For days, Rocky traveled in the branches of that tree all the way from Oneonta, 170 miles, becoming dehydrated and incredibly hungry along the way. After being discovered, she was nursed back to health with plenty of fluids, and with “all the mice she could eat” and then brought to a home where she flew off to live contentedly, telling the story, I assume, of her great Big Apple adventure.

I think we've all got something of Rocky in us these days. Wrenched unexpectedly from safety and home, we're in need of sustenance, of restoration, of care.

Jesus invites us to this table to feed us, to restore us. To give us what we need to continue on, doing the work he calls us to do.

Then keep awake, he says. Watch and wait. Watch and wait. The days are surely coming! The reign of God is near!

I invite us to close with this prayer, a prayer that gave me immeasurable comfort earlier in the month. I shared it with the session as we met the day after Election Day, but it's a prayer that's fitting for any time. Written by a colleague and friend, Rev. Rick Powell, the minister at Christian Temple on Edmondson Avenue here in Catonsville, it's called *A Prayer for While We Wait*, used with permission.

Gracious and loving God, we ask you today to be with us while we wait;
while we wait with so much hanging in the balance;
while we wait with deeply held convictions about how we want things to turn out;

while we wait with questions in our minds about how life will resume if things don't go our way.... or if they do.

We know, O God, that the story of your people has been a story filled with waiting, and we call upon the memory of all those through the ages who have waited.

Your people have waited by the shores of the Red Sea, by the banks of the River Jordan, by the waters of Babylon; and each time, you have waited with them.

Your people have waited for a savior to come, for a savior to return, and for a realm of justice to be established; and each time you have waited with them.

Your people have waited to be freed from slavery, to be given the opportunity to vote, to be treated with respect and dignity, and each time, you have waited with them.

Your people have waited on the borders, at the food pantries and on the phone trying to secure the benefits that are rightfully theirs, and each time you have waited with them.

Your people have waited for their sexual orientation to be honored, for their relationships to be acknowledged and even for congregations to welcome them, and each time you have waited with them.

We are part of a long tradition of active waiting, O God, and, in spite of all the ways we are worried – our prayer to you today is that we wait with hope –

A hope born out of the knowledge that, no matter what happens, you are waiting with us, and that your presence by our side will help guide what we do, and whose we are once the time for waiting is over.

We offer this prayer in the name of the one whose presence brings us that hope, Jesus the living, waiting, Christ.
Amen.

Let us offer our response to the Lord:

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
Let us strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives,
Even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
Praying: Come, Lord Jesus!**

¹ *SALT Weekly lectionary commentary, First Week of Advent (Year B)*