

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 30, 2008
First Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7
I Corinthians 1:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

The portion of Mark's Gospel which we've read this morning is known as Mark's "Little Apocalypse." It finds Jesus with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, where the disciples have commented on the magnificence of the Temple, and Jesus has informed them that this magnificent structure which took 46 years to build will come crashing down, stone upon stone.

The verses we've read today are Jesus' response to the disciples' question, "tell us, *when* will all this happen, and what will be the sign of its happening?"

The disciples' response is a natural response, borne of the kind of curiosity you and I would have if we were introduced to images of cosmic upheaval like the heavens shaking, the sun and moon being darkened, and the Son of Man arriving on the clouds.

And because we are just as human as they, we tend to focus our attention in the same direction that they focused theirs. We know that Jesus will return again. The primary question on our collective lips, however, is -- WHEN will Jesus come?

Such questions are unavoidable, I suppose. After all, inquiring minds want to know. Deep in the recesses of our hearts, we all wonder, *when* will Jesus come again?

Jesus answers our question in verse 32. He simply says, “I don’t know.” The truth is, no one knows except the Father. The angels in heaven don’t know. The Son himself does not even know. We could ask the question of Jesus today, this very minute, and the answer would be the same: *I don’t know*.

But in the final analysis, the question of *when* Jesus will return is not the most important question. The question I want to pose to you this morning is not centered around the *time* of Jesus’ return. The question I want to pose to you this morning centers around the *fact* of his return.

Now it might seem ludicrous for me to ask a group of believers gathered in church this question, but I need to ask it nonetheless: *Do you believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth again?* Are you firmly convinced in your mind and heart that he will arrive on the clouds with great glory, as the biblical images suggest?

That question is not a rhetorical question. I do not ask it merely to occupy time in the sermon this morning. It is not meant as a diversion from the central thrust of the sermon. **THE QUESTION IS THE CENTRAL THRUST OF THE SERMON.** And the question is not addressed to “current resident” or “current

occupant.” The question is spoken directly to you, and to me. Do *you* -- do *I* -- believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth again?

When I was about Davis’ age, my mom came to me one day and said, “I am going out to run errands. While I am gone, I want you to pick up your dirty clothes and put them in the laundry, I want you to pick up your things from the staircase, and I want you to do the dirty dishes in the sink for me.”

As she walked toward the door, I said, “mom, how long will you be gone?” Mom replied, “I don’t know.” I said, “mom, when will you be back?” Again, I heard, “I don’t know.” Mom made it very clear to me, though, that she wanted those tasks completed before she returned home.

I watched as mom drove away and the car disappeared from sight. I sat for a few minutes and tried to calculate *when* I thought she might return based on the errands she had to run and the amount of time I thought it would take her to complete them. But as I was doing my calculations, I could not help but notice the dishes in the sink. Then I thought about the clothes on my bedroom floor upstairs, and the host of items on the stairs that did not belong there.

Even though I was only thirteen years old, it became clear to me in those moments that *when* mom was returning was far less important than the fact that there were dishes in the sink, clothes on my floor, and trinkets on the stairs. Things needed to be done, and I needed to be busy doing them.

I set about doing those tasks, and I completed them. After I finished, I noticed something about the way I felt. There was a shift in my attitude with respect to my mom's return home. Before I had finished my assigned tasks, I was somewhat anxious, and even fearful, about my mom's coming home. But now the anxiety was gone. Now I actually found myself looking forward to her arrival. Fear had given way to anticipation.

Admittedly, this little slice of my own life experience may be a poor window through which to gaze at this Gospel text. But do not let the dirt on the window obscure the truth that lies behind it, dear ones. As we begin this season of Advent, our questions and preoccupations with *when* Jesus will return are misdirected and misguided. And if we're not careful and attentive, they will distract us from doing the truly important work of preparing for his coming.

We prepare for his coming not by sitting in an armchair and scanning the horizon, but by doing what he has called us to do. The relevant question as we enter Advent is not, *when is he coming?* The relevant question on this first Sunday of Advent is, *what should we be doing when he comes?*

The answer to that question is simple, and obvious. There is justice to pursue. There is peace for which to pray and labor. There are relationships in need of reconciliation. There are cycles of addiction and violence that need broken. There are broken hearts that need healing and hope.

As we enter this Advent season, the Spirit is at work among us. For Advent is not a passive waiting for a new and joyful beginning. Advent is the Spirit of God working through us, so that those who have no hope might also be able to celebrate a new and joyful beginning.

As we come to the table of the Lord, let us open our hearts anew to the presence of the Christ who comes to us, not merely as a babe in a manger, and not merely as the One who comes on the clouds with great glory, but also as the One who comes to us every moment and in *this* moment. Let us receive with faith the grace he offers us. And let us watch and wait his coming with gladness and hope, the hope that comes from being busy at the Master's business.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.