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Delivered 11/29/2011
At Cullowhee Baptist Church
Mark 13:24-37

Advent Every Day

Beth and I lived in England a few years ago, and Oxford was far enough north that we'd start to lose light at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. So I used to light candles in our bedroom to drive out the darkness. I love Advent. I love the way we show respect for the dark that always threatens to overcome us by creating these visible symbols of hope, joy, peace and love to keep us aglow in the weeks before that shortest day of the year, and to remind us that it is our work to spread that light into the world through our faith in the light that will always overcome the darkness, Jesus Christ. In the warm glow of our first candles of the new church year, let us listen to the words of the evangelist we know as Mark.

God, as we prepare ourselves for another year fighting to light the dark paths of the world in the hope that you will see our glow from your heavenly seat, give us the

wisdom and courage to understand the words your servants have given us and carry your torches where we alone may fear to tread.

It is a sign of the disruption, the upside-down, the topsy-turvy of Jesus, that we start Advent every new year with a description of the end of days. As Christians, we are through the looking glass. The story of Jesus starts not when he was born, or before he was born, but after he died and was born again. In this text, Jesus tells us that "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." That was one hundred generations ago. The gospel of Mark itself was written down two generations after this promise was made and these words were spoken. In Jesus's lifetime, and in the lifetime of our brother Paul, Advent was not a time for symbolic and ritualistic preparation for a holy day, the holy day of Christmas. It was the preparation for an imminent return, just as Jesus promised. "After that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."

The powers in heaven will be shaken. Jesus will disrupt the world. All that is known will be unknown. What is up will be down, down will be up, the lights in

the heavens will blink out and bow to the light of Jesus. And, for Christians in the first century, this disruption would have been welcome indeed. These were not, by and large, the most comfortable people in the world. They were the poor and powerless. And the promise of Jesus was that the re-ordering of the world was coming soon. But it did not happen. Those who heard these words, and the words of Paul in those early years, were disappointed. And as that disappointment mounted, and the promised-for reordering did not happen, they worried. We see it in Paul's letters, we see it in early church practice, and we see it in the hundreds of apocalyptic prophets proclaiming the end times from first century Ephesus to 21st century Atlanta. When the master is away, it is easy to get nervous. In the beginning, it seems like a holiday. The joy of freedom overcomes you, with the knowledge that you can work as you have always wanted, without the fear of failing. There is no one to check up on you. So you do your job as you've always wanted, with the joy of the work. Until you start to notice all the little things that you'd like some feedback about, some explanation about, some reassurance about. Some dispute resolution about. Is he right, or am I? Tell me. But there is no answer. And so you start to worry. Am I good enough? Will the master be angry when she gets back? Will she be disappointed? And the anxiety takes over. Is she finding my

replacement? Am I good enough? Am I wrong? Will she abandon me? It is the same with Jesus. No matter how many times we are reminded that Jesus will come like a thief in the night, that Jesus will not announce and, indeed, does not know the time of his return, that our own calculation is foolhardy, we are tempted to question. We are tempted to look through the scriptures for hidden knowledge, in the best tradition of our Christian ancestors. We are tempted to wonder whether there will be any return at all. We are tempted to spend our hours worrying instead of working.

And we quickly forget the admonition to keep awake. Because that worry and doubt and energy spent anticipating Jesus is just another way to fall asleep. For the darkness to creep up on us. Where we are worried about our own future, instead of the future of our fellows, our brothers and sisters, the darkness rises. When we doubt ourselves and our strength flags, the darkness rises. When we worry whether our time spent at church makes any difference, the shadows grow deeper. When we see our task in front of us but think, “God will never know,” in that moment of fooling ourselves, we invite the dark to hide the light. And that’s why we read these words at the beginning of each church year. Keep Awake! The

energy of Easter and the shining sun sustains us through the summer. The energy of our local calendar brings us through August, September and October, as WCU, fall mountain apples, and the hopes of the Georgia Bulldogs, Clemson Tigers and Iowa Hawkeyes take us with them. But now football season is over, the apples are gone and the students have holed themselves up in the library. We need a new reminder that though the day is five hours shorter than it was in June, the light that has burned for these 2000 years is ours to continue. The task is not finished. The work goes on. And so, we read these words in the shortest days of the year. We were not ready the first time Jesus appeared on earth, and the darkness would like us to be unprepared the next time, as well. But we know better, and it is up to us keep awake. And so, aware of that closing dark, we make it easy in the run-up to Christmas. We come together to light these candles and drive out the darkness until the days start to get longer. We make our houses beacons of the love of Christ. We fill up the soup kitchens and food banks in joyful abundance. But Advent doesn't end at Christmas. It is a period of preparation and we are not preparing for Christmas, we are preparing for Christ.

And we don't prepare by selling all our belongings, or by waiting expectantly on our rooftops, as some people have done. Jesus came to free us from

fear and worry, to assure us that we are all loved children of God, and included in God's infinite grace. This Advent, this period of preparation is God's way of saying, you are in charge of the house. What will you do with it? Will you make your rooms glorious with the master's silver while letting the muck build up in the stables? Will you engage in power struggles with the other servants, hoping for some sort of minor lordship of your own? Or will you use your time to clean, and mend, and care for each other? Will you find ways to make the house better than when the master left it, or worry that Jesus won't like the new drapes? It's up to us to make the house ready as best we can, and how will it look if Jesus gets back and we say, "Lord, lord, the house may be a mess, but at least we've turned away everyone who doubted your return?" This period of Advent is our great opportunity to build up that house so it has room and shelter and warmth for everyone. The re-ordering of the world hasn't come from above like those early Christians thought it would, so it needs to come from below.

Because Jesus has left us in charge of his house, and it is still in disorder. In one hundred generations, people are still starving. People are still freezing. People are still struggling. People are still suffering. After a hundred generations, People are still lonely. There are people all around us who do not feel the warmth of Christ.

There are still people who find themselves alone in the darkness. And, as servants of Christ, we have been left with a simple task. Put the house in order. Our job is not to judge other people our job is not to worry about state of our souls, our job is to share Jesus's love by feeding Jesus's sheep. Every day. Advent is every day
Advent is in February, when it is bitter cold and fuel is expensive. Advent is in March when the food pantries don't have as much. Advent is in July when we are on vacation, but hunger is not. Advent is the day when we see a person crying, struggling in his own private darkness. Advent is every day. And every day we have a choice. Do we pick up Christ's candle, and bring light to the darkness? Or do we rest in our false security and let darkness overcome us? We have the choice. In this church, we choose the light. We hear about soldiers who long for the comforts of home, and we send them. We see people struggling to get into their homes, and we build a ramp. We hear that people are hungry, and we bring food. We hear about people struggling, we pray for them and tell them that someone loves them and looks after them. But we have that choice every day.

And that is the choice Jesus has left us in his absence. Will we bring this light into the darkness, every day? It is in our keeping. Every day.