



ADVENT 1 – SERMON
THE REV. DR. SARAH TRAVIS

If you have ever been camping,
You might have had the experience of trying to find your way in the dark.
After several weeks at a summer camp I could find my way from lodge to cabin
without falling over tree roots
or losing my way.
It's amazing how our eyes can become accustomed to the dark –
and when the path is familiar, we don't need to see where we are going – we can
feel it.
There is a trick, though, to finding your way on a less-familiar path.
If you look up, you will see a space between the trees.
On a clear night, the stars shine in that space,
And if you follow that starry path, you will find your way.
The problem is that the stars are not always visible.
And if we find ourselves in unknown territory, without any light at all,
We are easily frightened.
Advent begins in the dark.
It is no wonder that we seek comfort in Christmas lights and liturgical candles
because the nights are long.
Sometime in the month of September, right after the school year begins,
we realize that the nights are getting longer.
As we move toward the end of summer, through the autumn,
toward the winter solstice, the sun sets earlier and earlier
and one day you find yourself driving home from work in the dark.
This is the rhythm of the seasons – we spend half the year moving from light to
darkness,



and the other half moving from darkness to light.

The gospel of Mark paints a picture of a truly terrifying event –
the cosmos turned upside-down.

No sun.

No moon.

The stars falling out of the sky.

These astronomical fixtures provide the necessities of life –
everything on earth operates according to the rhythms of the sun and moon –
Without them, there is no harvest, no tides, no light, no warmth
no life at all.

An earth without heat and life is an earth that cannot sustain any living thing
and thus, Mark is describing the end of the world.

This is a profoundly unsettling scripture text.

And it is intended to be unsettling.

It belongs to a kind of biblical writing that responds to very, very difficult situations.

Apocalyptic literature is a way of communicating both fear and hope
to people who are suffering, desperate for salvation, afraid for their lives.

This kind of writing is so unsettling and frightening because it names
that feeling or experience that the world is ending.

The first hearers of Mark's gospel might have heard these words against the backdrop
of the oppression of the Roman government,
and the destruction of the sacred temple in Jerusalem –
which actually happened in the year 70 CE.

Those first century believers were experience the end of their world.

Perhaps their lives were so changed, so unpredictable,
that the stars falling from the sky seems like a real possibility.

It might feel like that for us, sometimes.



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{Advent 1: Mark 13:24-37}

Think about the patterns of weather we have witnessed this year –
hurricanes and tropical storms churning through the Caribbean.

Think about earthquakes....in Mexico, Italy.

Think about the political upheavals, the global violence,
terror, fear, uncertainty.

Sometimes, it seems like the world as we know it is ending.

And it is difficult to imagine how things could get any worse.

What about our own lives?

Since the end of October, if not before,

we have been bombarded with Christmas carols and tinsel,
sales flyers, holiday commercials, pumpkin spiced foods –

all of it cajoling us to be cheerful, excited, put on a happy face

And get ready for the big event – Christmas is coming.

Many of us sigh because we are too tired and busy at this time of year.

And many of us sigh because this time of year is actually very difficult

because we have experienced some deep grief and sorrow,

and the radiance of the season simply does not match our inward experience of
pain.

On or around December 21, many congregations offer a “longest night” service.

This service is intended for people who find Christmas difficult.

It may be the death of a loved one in the past year,

it may be the death of a loved one many years ago.

Or the end of a relationship.

The end of a career.

Illness – physical or mental.

Or maybe just a persistent sense that there is a need to go deeper

in the season of advent, that there is tremendous value to waiting and watching

In the dark,

without being numbed and lulled by the glow of fairy lights.



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We don't talk about this enough – the darkness and pain that is inherent in the season of advent.

Our text from Mark's gospel is full of pain –

We can read in it the pain of Mark's community.

But we can also read our own pain, and the pain of our world.

It might be tempting to just go to sleep, and wake up when the days are brighter.

Maybe we think the animals who hibernate have the right idea –
they sleep through the cold days and nights.

Jesus' words urge us to respond differently – however.

Not to go to sleep, but to stay awake.

And here we get to the good news – the gospel message:

Something is happening that will break into the pain of the present time.

Heaven and earth may indeed pass away,
but God is acting.

If we are yearning to be changed, yearning for new life,
it is coming.

Jesus is coming.

No matter how dark it may seem,

The Light of the World is near.

We are not alone in our experience of darkness –

God created both day and night.

God exists in the dark as much as God exists in the light.

We are creatures of day and night.

And there is joy to be found in both-

it is during the longest, deepest night

that we truly recognize our need for redemption-

we recognize our need to be comforted and healed.

God gives us eyes to see in the dark,



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to trace the contours of suffering
to dwell alongside those who suffer.

In the words of the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor

“I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light,
Things that have saved my life over and over again,
So that there really is only one logical conclusion.
I need darkness as much as I need light.”¹
The darkness is not frightening at all to our God –
God is with us.
O come, o come Emmanuel.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, pg. 5.