

WATCH WITH HOPE (MARK 12:24-26)
(ADVENT 1, YEAR B)

We have a job. Our job is to wait in the darkness. And to wait without losing hope.

That is what Jesus told his disciples in the 13th chapter of Mark, our Gospel reading today. Only four of them were there to hear him—Peter, James, John and Andrew. They were Jesus' inner circle, the first four to put down what they were doing and follow Jesus back at the beginning.

They had just walked with Jesus to the Mount of Olives and sat down with Him there, looking across the Kidron Valley at the great walled city of Jerusalem, with the temple crowning it at its highest point.

Jesus told them that the whole place would come tumbling down one day soon. Of course, they wanted Jesus to tell them when. How would they know when the very center of their universe was about to blow away?

That is when Jesus told them about the dismantling of the sky, how the stars would fall from their constellations like pearls from a broken necklace. How the sun would be smudged and the moon snuffed out before they saw the Son of Man riding the clouds with great power and glory.

Jesus did not tell them these things to scare them. He said all this to comfort them. They needed to know that even something as frightening as the end of the world was in God's good hands. When the cosmos collapsed and every light in the sky was put out, they were to remember what He had told them.

They were to remember that God is sovereign over darkness as well as light. And they were to watch, watch even in the darkness, to watch for His coming in the clouds.

Well, here we are ready for a nice, sweet Christmas sort of Bible lesson today. We are putting up decorations and lights. The displays are up in the stores. Christmas is coming....

But wait, not so fast. Remember I told you our job is to wait with hopefulness.

Advent, the season of preparation, these few weeks before Christmas, Advent tells us, "Slow down. Get it right. Don't rush to Christmas. There's enough rushing going on in our lives. No, slow down, get ready, watch and wait. And wait with hope."

Instead of shepherds, angels, wise men and Baby Jesus, our Bible lesson today is all about the end of the world. How's that for a curve ball?

Do you ever think about the end of the world? If and when we do, we likely assume that God will perform some peaceful renovation of the world, sort of a huge urban renewal project. Of course, we loyal believers, we will be in charge. No chaos and outrage and darkness, but a smooth rehab transition from the old world to the new one.

Well, that's not the picture Jesus paints in the Bible reading this morning. No, we can't have a new world without letting go of the old world. The old world will have to crash and burn before anything fresh can be born in its ashes. It's the end of the world as we know it.

And this is good news. It is the good news of the end of the world, a piece of the gospel most of us would just as soon forget, but whoop, there it is. When the end comes, it will

not be because God is absent, but because God is very present, having come in awesome power and great glory to make all things new.

So, merry Christmas and all. The world is coming to an end. Put that in your Christmas cards.

In the meantime, Jesus tells us our job is to watch. Jesus says watch. Not watch out, but watch. To stay alert, to pay attention so that we aren't snoozing when the master comes home.

Now there are at least three different ways Christians have gone about the job of waiting in the past.

First, for some, watching means looking for the literal end of the world. There are books you can buy on the mathematical formulae contained in the book of Revelation, with advice on how to be at the right place and the right time.

The only problem with this approach is that it tries to discover what even Jesus himself could not discover. Remember, Jesus said, "Truly, of that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son of Man, but only the Father." (*Matthew 24:36*) It does not make sense to make predictions. Just watch and be hopeful.

Another way Christians have settled down to watch is by letting their awareness of the end heighten their commitment to the present. This is a good way to wait.

And yet a third way to watch for the end is to suspect that there is not just one end to the world any more than there is just one coming of Christ to look forward to. When Jesus died, oh, his disciples believed the world had ended. When Jerusalem fell and Nero swooped down on the young Christian Church like a mad ruthless vulture, they believed the world had ended.

In a manner of speaking, the world can end any day of the week with a declaration of war or the death of a spouse or a grim diagnosis. Watching for Christ's coming again in power and great glory can become the only light we have in such dark times. When sun and moon and stars have all been snuffed out.

Whichever of these three ways of waiting makes the most sense to you, they have one thing in common. The One who is coming is not an enemy but a friend. He may come in the light, but He may also come in the evening or at midnight or at three in the morning. Darkness does not stop Him and it does not have to stop us either. Our job is not to lie in bed with the pillow over our heads or to shove the heavy furniture in front of the bedroom door for fear of the darkness.

Our job is to light the candle and set it in the window. Our job is to watch for the One who comes to us with healing. Our job is to open the door for Him before He can even raise his hand to knock. Our job is to wait with hope.

Who knows when that will be? Nobody, that's who.

Watch, therefore. Take heed, watch. For what Jesus says to us, Jesus says to all: Be ready. Have hope. Watch.