

“Does Anybody Really Know What Time It is?”

Mark 13:24-37

Don't you love the holidays? Bright lights! Wonderful music! Good cheer! Giving and receiving gifts! Decorations. Good food! Parties! Good times with family and friends! It is hard not to get all caught up in the Christmas spirit of the age. It is alluring. There are a lot of things to like about it. Frankly, I'm not that interested in bashing it, like some kind of Grinch or Scrooge, who says bah humbug to the whole thing. In many ways it beats the ordinary days of the rest of the year.

Yet, year after year many ministers feel compelled to bemoan how we have missed the “reason for the season?” I've done it myself on more than one occasion! Perhaps it is because there is a depth to the season that is often missing. Perhaps it is because we light our candles and Christmas lights because there is so much darkness in the world. Perhaps it is because we put up evergreen trees as a symbol of life, because there is so much death in the world. Perhaps it is because we enjoy good food, knowing that not everybody has enough to eat and we ourselves eat all too much fast food and prepackaged, barely digestible, chemically enhanced processed foods. Perhaps it is because we celebrate the message of the Prince of Peace, knowing that in many places in the world wars and civil unrest rage. Perhaps it is because we love to hear the old, old stories about the birth of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, because all too often we do not sense God's presence in the world. Holidays help us to forget the dark things and the dark times and celebrate faith, hope and love. The great thing about the holidays is that even if we are not experiencing faith and love, we can live in

hope of their coming. Holidays not only provide a respite in the present, they help us live into the future with hope.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. As the writers of *Texts for Preaching A Lectionary Commentary* ... put it, **“Contrary to the manner in which it is often celebrated in the churches, Advent begins not on a note of joy, but of despair. Humankind has reached the end of its rope. All our schemes for self-improvement, for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves, have come to nothing. We have now realized at the deepest level of our being that we cannot save ourselves and that, apart from the intervention of God, we are totally and irretrievably lost.”**

That the world finds itself in this position is not new. It is a recurring story. The Gospel of Mark is sometimes called the “wartime” gospel. Bible scholars believe it was written around 70 C.E. The first century was a time when the economic and taxation policies increasingly deprived more and more Jewish peasants of their ancestral land, driving them into increasing poverty. In 66 C.E. the Jews revolted and temporarily kicked out their Roman oppressors, but by 70 Rome had inexorably and viciously reasserted its dominance. Jerusalem was captured. The temple was destroyed and with it the sacrificial and cultic system it fostered.

It is in this context that the Gospel of Mark was written and chapter 13, which is known as the Little Apocalypse, reflects this, with its warnings of the future destruction of the temple, with its talk of false messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, of nation rising against nation, persecution and betrayal.

So it is that our gospel passage begins, **“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens**

will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”

The purpose of this language is not to promise “pie in the sky by and by.” The purpose of the Apocalyptic viewpoint is to make it clear that God is still in charge and that in the end God’s will will be done. The purpose is to offer hope to a world that seems to be beyond hope. The purpose is to free people from paralyzing fear and hopelessness. The purpose is to free people up from enervating despair, apathy, and cynicism.

The Message of the Gospel of Mark, says Marcus Borg, is that “the time is fulfilled”; the kingdom that Jesus spoke of is now “at hand.” This reality calls for a certain kind of response, so it is that in Mark Jesus goes about speaking of and demonstrating, the “way” or “path” or “road” a disciple of Jesus is to follow in this world. Mark opens with a citation of Isaiah 40 **“In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.”** Borg says that the wilderness being spoken of here is a reference back to the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon.

Repentance becomes the way that one begins to follow Jesus. I will turn to Borg’s own words, **“Repentance here does not mean contrition for sin, as it often has in later Christian theology. Rather, its meaning is rooted in the exile story: to repent is to return from exile. To connect that concept back to kingdom of God language: to repent – to embark on the journey of return – is to enter the kingdom of God.”**

To do this one must die to the old self and the old way of seeing and being in the world. Having done this a new path, or way is opened up into God’s future, a future that is shaped by God’s will and purpose. This leads to newness of life. Borg says, **“That taken literally, it is the path of martyrdom, which may have been an issue when Mark was written.**

Taken metaphorically, it refers to the internal process at the center of the way of Jesus and the life of discipleship.”

So it is that our passage calls for a constant state of alert. We are told that the signs of God’s kingdom are already budding forth in the world. The world may still be in the barren depths of winter, but already the branches of the fig trees are becoming “tender” and “are putting forth its leaves.” The summer harvest of God’s kingdom is approaching.

We are told that no one, but God knows the time. **“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come.”** When we look at our world one wonders if anyone knows what time it is and what the appropriate action for the time is. Many voices claim to know: voices in the church, political voices, economic voices, scientific voices, professional voices, etc. To which voices are we to listen? What signs are we to look for? Does anyone really know what time it is? One has to be careful in perilous times. There are, as Mark points out, many charlatans out there!

Yet, Mark makes it clear that this is not to be a time of passive waiting, of sitting around twiddling one’s thumbs, until the Lord comes. Mark says, **“It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with their work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on watch.”** Notice, only the doorkeeper has the job of watching. The other servants have their regular household tasks to perform. They are not to do anything extraordinary. They are to keep on doing what they always have done. Their joy is to keep the household in a state of readiness for the Lord’s return. They are to maintain a state of readiness to welcome the Lord back when he comes.

President Jimmy Carter was asked at the turn of the millennium to speak at a major forum. He was given the theme, “What is the world’s greatest challenge in the new millennium?” How would you respond to this? . . . Carter says he gave his response with little hesitation **“the greatest challenge we face is the growing chasm between the rich and poor people on the earth.”**

The statistics are appalling. There are over six billion people in the world today. More than half of all people live on less than \$2 a day! 1.2 billion people have to survive on \$1 a day!

Even here in the United States, where the average family income is \$55,000 a year the news is not good. Minimum wage has been stuck at \$5.15 an hour. It is not indexed to inflation. Working 40 hours a week, full time at minimum wage, one can earn \$10,300. The poverty rate for a husband and wife with one child was \$12,490 in the continental United States in 2004! It is not surprising that the poorest people in our society are suffering!

Even at the macro level there is growing sense that something is wrong. Warren Buffet, one of the world’s wealthiest men, wrote in his Berkshire Hathaway annual report, **“The net ownership of the U.S. by other countries and their citizens a decade from now will amount to roughly 11 trillion [about equal to our current gross national income] A country that is now aspiring to an ‘ownership society’ will not find happiness in – and I’ll use the hyperbole here for emphasis – a ‘sharecropper’s society.’ But that’s precisely where our trade policies, supported by Republicans and Democrats alike, are taking us.”**

Perhaps it is not an accident that the Bible, which so many people think is primarily about heaven or the inner spiritual life or about belief in God or

Jesus also has a great deal to say about economics, particularly the justice of economics. Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourner's Magazine*, and a group of seminary students looked at the Bible and found some surprising results. One out of every 16 verses in the New Testament referred to wealth and poverty! If you look at the three synoptic Gospels, our primary source of input on Jesus' life, teachings and significance of his life, one finds that one out of ten verses deal with wealth and poverty! If you look at the Gospel of Luke one in seven verses deals with wealth and poverty! What if we look at the Hebrew Scriptures, the original Testament? Here only idolatry was mentioned more times than the relationship between rich and poor! Let's face it the Bible is very interested in the question of economic justice! This would suggest that the church and those who follow Jesus need to be very interested in economic justice as well!

One of my former teachers at Eden Seminary, Doug Meeks, pointed out that the word Ecumenical, the word we use to describe the Body of Christ, the Church universal, comes from the same Greek word as economics. Economics is comes from the Greek word for household, as in household accounts, the family checkbook, if you will.

A closing thought from Jimmy Carter, former president and lifelong Christian, **“When we recite the Lord’s Prayer and pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth, we are asking for an end to political and economic injustice within worldly regimes. In fact, all major religious faiths are shaped by prophetic mandates to do justice, love mercy, protect and care for widows and orphans, and exemplify God’s compassion for the poor and victimized.”**

The writer of Mark tells us, **“Therefore keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at**

midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!” Amen.