

# SERMON

by Rev. Emily Chapman

November 27, 2011

*(First Sunday in Advent, Year B - 2011)*

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

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**Lectionary Texts:** Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; and Mark 13:24-37

## **Isaiah 64:1-9**

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – <sup>2</sup>as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil– to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! <sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. <sup>4</sup>From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup>You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.*

*<sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. <sup>7</sup>There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. <sup>8</sup>Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.*

## **Mark 13:24-37**

*<sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
<sup>25</sup>and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

*<sup>26</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.  
<sup>27</sup>Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

<sup>28</sup>“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup>“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>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, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

When I was growing up, the five-minute warning was a big part of life. I suppose because it was hard to get three kids out of the house, my parents thought if they let us know we were leaving soon, we would take initiative, get up, put up the toys we were playing with, find our shoes, put them on, and go to the door to get in the car. You can probably imagine how well that worked for them most of the time. Usually, in the same place we sat before, we received three-minute warnings, two-minute warnings, and the dreaded one-minute warning....that essentially meant we were already in trouble because there was no chance at being ready to go. You did not want to hear “One-minute warning!” called from the next room.

Someone is coming and you are NOT ready.

Advent is a season of preparation, of trying to make ourselves ready, but the Gospel of Mark skips straight to the one-minute warning, where you had best get ready in a BIG hurry!

His words challenge us this morning as we begin Advent. Advent starts the same way every year. It starts the same way in here....in the dark. Then we light the first Advent candle. The first Advent candle is the Prophet’s Candle, which may be

why we have these strong words from Isaiah and Mark. It's the candle that represents hope, that promises a better future and a world that is drastically different than the one we know.

Lighting the Advent candle is a wonderful ritual, but certainly not the only ritual this weekend. Each year my anxiety level grows as we approach the day after Thanksgiving, and this year I didn't even have to wait that long. Thankfully, it seems this year for the first time in a while, there were no actual fatalities on Black Friday. You can nearly always count on someone being trampled to death by someone else clamoring for a 50 percent-off Xbox 360.

Standardly, Black Friday is a reminder that we have a lot of impulses in us this season that have nothing to do with Jesus. Some years, it seems like the only sign we need that the whole world is absolutely falling apart. We know the world is broken... one look at the news, or any careful glance outside the doors of this sanctuary will tell us that. That's why in Advent we gather in the dark to wait for the coming of the light. As advertisers and stores ramp up for their biggest season of the year, our calendar in the church starts telling us about the world falling apart, about it turning into something new entirely.

The impulses behind Advent should alarm those who are overly enamored with the current system, as well as any others who are overly confident in their ability to engineer what's best for the world. I suspect that describes many of us in this room, whether we like to admit it or not. Advent expresses the insistence that all is not right around us, something I suspect you can tell when you look at the world, at our city, maybe even at your own life. That's a dangerous expression. Stoking hopes for a new world, for justice *really* to be for all, usually implies that old systems, governments, and loyalties aren't what they're cracked up to be. This is exactly what prophets do, which may be why they are always in so much trouble.

Which I suppose leads us to our Gospel lesson for today. The transformation anticipated in Mark is such a monumental and all-encompassing upheaval that its description is filled with confusing symbolism. It's really a shame how passages such as this one have been arrogated by the "Left Behind" camp and others who view the

Bible as an encrypted map of the future, leaked by God to code-breakers, who derive from it a God who is just itching to snuff out the multitudes.

That is not the message of the Gospel.

The symbolism here is unnerving, even though it was familiar to ancient audiences. What it really says is that in the face of the God's dream for the world coming true, every other power (symbolized by sun, moon, and stars) receives notice and sees its light go out. Every other power that has tried and failed to rule the earth will fall.

Advent is not for the faint of heart. If you are afraid of Jesus coming into your life and messing with it too much, Advent is going to be a tough season. No aspect of human existence goes untransformed when God enters in for good. A new light has come.

But for now, we still sit in the dark, seeing much around us that is unredeemed. It's one of the reasons that this season can be so hard. There are things about our world and our community and our homes that we would certainly like to see transformed. This is a time when it is easy to see disparity in our community, when we have spent the weekend with our national greed being showcased on the news; it's a time when it is easy to notice empty places at your table, when it's easy to find things are not quite as they should be. That is why each year we come to this place and discipline ourselves to wait, to stop the endless swirl of lights and shopping and red and green everywhere, to come and sit here in the dark and long for the time that God has promised us is coming, when a new world is really possible, when justice and peace are really for everyone, when everything that is broken is restored.

Our Gospel tells us relentlessly that there is hope for all of us. For us living north of the equator, it makes sense that Advent coincides with winter's dimmest and longest nights. We light candles, whose tiny, pathetic flames stand defiantly against the night. They say: No matter how much waiting – and working – lies between now and the dawn, we are not giving up hope.

We will sing many songs of hope and of waiting in this season as we wait on the Lord to return and the promises of God's dream for the world becoming a reality. One of my favorite songs is called the *Canticle of the Turning*, and it seems appropriate on this first Sunday of Advent when our prophets have told us that the whole world is about to turn, and that it is turning toward justice, peace and hope for all people. Its words are:

1. My soul cries out with a joyful shout  
that the God of my heart is great,  
And my spirit sings of the wondrous things  
that you bring to the ones who wait.  
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,  
and my weakness you did not spurn,  
So from east to west shall my name be blest.  
Could the world be about to turn?

*Refrain*

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,  
and the world is about to turn!

2. Though I am small, my God, my all,  
you work great things in me,  
And your mercy will last from the depths of the past  
to the end of the age to be.  
Your very name puts the proud to shame,  
and to those who would for you yearn,  
You will show your might, put the strong to flight,  
for the world is about to turn.

3. From the halls of power to the fortress tower,  
not a stone will be left on stone.  
Let the king beware for your justice tears  
ev'ry tyrant from his throne.  
The hungry poor shall weep no more,  
for the food they can never earn;  
There are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,  
for the world is about to turn.