

## To Dwell Among Us: For Nearness

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Mark 13:24-37 on Sunday, December 3, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem

I.

*Are we there yet? Is it time? Has my package arrived? Is my treatment almost over? Will we ever ... get there?*

Fill in the blank with any of the yearnings in our lives – that we reach toward, that we count down for, that we wish would hurry up and get here, that we think, “man, once this thing happens, then we’ll be ok,” – and we’ve tapped into the “not yet but near” spirit of Advent.

The season of Advent, in its waiting and preparation for the coming Christ, its darkness and quiet, its mystery and hiddenness, its signs and wonders offer us countless ways to resist the glitz and sparkle that define a commercialized Christmas that has already surrounded us for weeks. We’ll see “A Holly Jolly Christmas” and raise you an “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” Take the endless stream of Christmas lights igniting the night sky, and give us a candle in the dark. Let’s trade the lies of perfection, happiness, endless youth, success, for the truth of good news in spite of it all.

Nora Gallagher calls Advent the “counterweight of liturgical time... one time set against another.”<sup>1</sup> Yet for many of us, the choice to lean into Advent’s invitation doesn’t just *happen*. Rather, as we’ve learned this fall, it takes **tending** these countercultural postures of Advent to give the truth and intention of the season time and space to breathe. It takes our attention to live as though our redemption is drawing near. For when we wonder, “what is the point of it all? Not just the gifts and the shopping, the decorations and the parties, the carols and the concerts... but even the birth of Jesus... just...

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3637>

why?," perhaps this simple phrase gives us a simple reason, speaking to both time and place: "to dwell among us." *Jesus came to dwell among us. God came near to stay near. Emmanuel, God with us.*

## II.

Nearness draws us into the Gospel of Mark and the prophet Isaiah as Advent begins. It's nearness that Isaiah proclaims, giving voice on behalf of a people who walk in darkness, a people oppressed and powerless and desperate for God to intervene. "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down," the prophet cries out to the Lord. It's nearness that Jesus proclaims, naming here to his disciples in the Gospel of Mark about what is to come as he nears the end of his life.

Mark is the earliest of the four gospels to be written, and Mark's context was that of chaos and catastrophe. The Roman Empire had, as Jesus proclaimed, destroyed the Jewish temple, and in so doing, threatened the heart and soul of the faith. The people of God were living in unprecedented times where so much of what they knew had experienced this cataclysmic upending. They were fearful, bewildered, afraid, and suffering. I imagine the followers of Jesus hearing his shocking, apocalyptic words and wondering: *where exactly is God? And how might we find hope?*

Apocalyptic imagery filled Jesus' words: "the sun will be darkened, the moon without light, the stars falling from heavens and powers shaken. Then you'll see the Son of Man coming. And look to the fig tree," Jesus continues. "Just as you know when summer nears because of its leaves, so too will you know that the Son is near. The time will be unknown. So keep alert. Stay awake."

## III.

I don't have to tell you all the ways in which it feels like the sun has darkened around us. Violence pervades. War destructs. Hatred hardens. Burnout settles into our bones. An endless stream of fears turns us inward, anxious and afraid. Hearts stop. Tests come back positive. Relationships unravel. The center does not hold. Surely in these moments, it may seem that God is anywhere but here... even anywhere but near! Surely in these moments, we cry out to God, "would you please get those fig leaves growing or tear open those heavens and get down here NOW!" Surely the darkneses of these moments feel as impenetrable to crowd out any possibility of hope.

But you know what? The darkness is exactly where God dwells. Shadows are God's specialty. Despair is precisely where God draws near. In the darkness, in the chaos, in the deep freeze of anxiety and worry, in stagnation and isolation, in the dislocation and the depression, in blighted cities and run-down hamlets, in broken-up relationships and shame-filled souls, God tears open the heavens and comes right into the darkness to dwell, to nestle and take root, to be near.

In fact, that's where God thrives, these dark places where new life is worth the wait. In the chaos and waters of the deep from which all creation was formed. In the seeds of flowering tree pressed into dark soil. In the womb where Divine and Human knit together in the fullness of time. In the tomb where death never had the final word. Where is God? Near to us in the darkness, bringing all things to life.

And how then do we hope, when darkness surrounds and the age terrifies? We hope, in part, because we know where God is — NEAR, right in the midst of it with us, making all things new. We hope, because we love and are loved. We hope because we know that God is not done, because we see

the world as it is and still long for the world as we hope it to be. We hope because we have caught a glimpse of justice that rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. We hope because we've seen grace so amazing and forgiveness that welcomes the prodigal home again. We hope amidst ordinary to do lists and worrisome medical tests, aging parents who never remember our names and bosses who think we never do anything right. We hope because we know that God who comes near to us in Jesus promises to stay close.

Hope, as Jesus says, keeps us awake. It helps us to stay alert. It keeps our spirits attuned to what lies below the frostline, under what's hard-packed and frozen, buried deep into the ground just waiting to come to life.

#### IV.

We've had an unusually hard season of loss within our congregation, as too many of our beloved friends have died, some suddenly and painfully, and departed our lives here on earth. You wouldn't be alone in wondering, "are we there yet, God? Isn't this enough for awhile?"

Yet even in the grief that blankets us with sadness, I have watched you draw near. You haven't pulled back, assuming your grief belongs in the shadows of isolation. You haven't clammed up, shrouding your vulnerability in an armor of stoicism. No – you have come near. You have come near to God, and come near to each other. You have dwelled with each other, and friends, in you, I have seen signs of hope, of Advent hope, signs of God's nearness to us, signs of God's near-but-not-yet dream for this world where "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

This kind of hope is a farther-reaching hope, one that knows that wholeness and resurrection and life abundant have a longer horizon. Hope is

like that long arc bending toward justice. It takes time and patience and attentiveness and care. It's like Sam Wells once said, "Hope is not a wilful, taunting, reckless demand that God make an arbitrary alteration in the course of events. It is a faithful, patient expectation that God will, over time, make present the relations and conditions of the kingdom to those who in word and action anticipate its coming." He was right: "Community generates hope, because those committed to one another generate momentum and expectation of what God has in store; and hope generates community, since there is nothing more infectious than seeing beautiful things happen over and over again."<sup>2</sup>

## V.

So friends, on this first Sunday of Advent as we look ahead for these glimpses of the nearness of God, perhaps you'll spot them in the jingle jangle of the holidays. Perhaps you'll spot them in the garland and poinsettias, the lights and nativities. Perhaps you worry you can't spot them at all, and thus can't hope at all, for the darkness has closed in upon you.

To you, to us, may we hear again the good news ringing from ancient days to this very hour: the God who tears open the heavens is the God who comes near to us in Jesus. Whose purpose is to dwell with us, so that hope will never be far away.

So we wait and prepare. We stay awake to these glimpses. We draw near to God and to each other. We hope above all else. Amen!

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Wells, *A Future That's Bigger Than the Past*, p141-142.