

Murky with a Chance of Ominous (Mark 13:24-37)

Back in the summer of 2010, Teresa and I came to Seattle to interview for the position of Sr. Pastor here. It was either late July or early August—I can't remember exactly which, but it was in that season of the year when Seattle is at its best, weather-wise. It was the time of year that makes the rest of the year worth enduring. We had never been to this part of the country and thought: how did we miss this all of our lives? After we had accepted your invitation to come here, we headed back to SoCal and let folks know we were heading to Seattle, and a number of the comments were variations of "you know it rains a lot there." Of course, that's the popular notion of Seattle—rain city, even though many parts of the country actually get more rain than us. We just like to spread it out.

Once we moved here, I took notice of the weather forecasts and, naturally, they were different than what we were accustomed to in SoCal. There the forecasts were typically: Sunny and warm. Occasionally they were: Sunny, with a chance of showers. But here it was flipped: Rain, with a chance of a sun-break. Forecasters in SoCal are tanned, confident, and smiling as they predict the days ahead. Here they are often apologetic. Forecasting Seattle weather is an art form—it's learning how to deliver unwelcome news so that folks don't get too depressed and you can keep your job.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and the lectionary text for this day involves a bit of forecasting. While the popular mood is eager to push into Christmas—perhaps now more than ever given all we've experienced this year—the scripture points us in a different direction, one that has Jesus forecasting climate, but more the climate of the time rather than weather. And if we had to sum it up for the evening newscast, we might call it "Murky, with a chance of ominous." That sounds disjointed on the threshold of Christmas and maybe it's a shade depressing given our anticipation. But this reminds us that Christmas remembers the appearance of the Messiah of Israel, who, by virtue of his appearance and ministry was not just Israel's messiah, but indeed the Savior of the world. And that is indeed glad and welcome news worthy of celebration. However, Advent now represents a time of waiting for Christ's return, what is often characterized as the Second Coming of Christ where Jesus arrives not as the lowly babe in a manger, but as the Lord of Glory, the King of Creation inaugurating his eternal reign personally, visibly, and with power. This is also glad and welcome news worthy of celebration, but getting there, according to Jesus, is not a walk in the park.

The passage Jamie read for us today comes on the heels of Jesus' dark forecast. He and the disciples were in Jerusalem—the heart of the world for Jews—just a few days prior to Passover, the primary celebratory feast of the Jews that remembered their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They had visited the Temple, the center of Jewish worship—a magnificent edifice evoking awe in the disciples. It would be similar to what you might feel after visiting the Vatican. It would have been impressive, but when they commented on its grandeur, Jesus, in effect, said, "don't get carried away—it's all coming down and will turn into a heap of rubble." That would have been shocking especially in the face of the relative calm of the moment as they anticipated the Passover celebration. What could this mean? And when might this happen? We might expect that Jesus was anticipating the immediate future—the one that would unfold over the course of the next week, but as tumultuous as that would be, Jesus had the long view in mind—the view that incorporated the long arc of God's work in creation, the decisive piece of which would commence in earnest over the next few days.

The forecast was daunting filled with global distress and gloom as international conflict would roil and natural disaster would follow. During this time his followers would experience persecution and betrayal along with unprecedented anxiety. It wasn't the sort of outlook his disciples were used to hearing from Jesus, but he, ever the realist summed up the character of these events as "normal history," as Peterson translates it in the Message. If Jesus was correct about this—and his disciples had no reason to believe otherwise—they would have to hold in tension Jesus' vision of the kingdom—the zenith of peace and blessing—with the reality of the world's turmoil marching on.

We know something of this. Perhaps now in sharper relief than most of us can remember. We're living in an age of anxiety amid global conflict as countries vie for supremacy on a number of fronts. We don't even have to venture very far to witness conflict in terms of social disparity, racial tension, and strident political wrangling that pits not nations, but neighbors and family members against one another in ideological battle. There seems to be a simultaneous yearning among us to be heard, and to be left alone. The malaise enveloping us has put truth on trial causing confusion while polarizing the populace leading to tribalism fueled by contempt resulting in emotional weariness and fatigue—not to mention those who find themselves struggling for breath in ICU's, and those tirelessly caring for them along with the anxiety of their loved ones.

We know something of what Jesus said. And its present duration prompts attempts at escapism, for those who can. Some of it is dire as deaths from despair increase; others escape through substance abuse and self-medication to alter reality. The more benign avenues find folks investing time in virtual reality, or stories of hope that have happy endings to seed anticipation for a better outcome. Of course, we're not the first generation to experience cataclysmic, world-changing conflict. The original audience for Mark's gospel had likely just witnessed the fall of Jerusalem following the disastrous Jewish rebellion quashed by Imperial Rome. They saw first-hand what Jesus had foretold—and more was on the way. And while ours is not the first generation to experience this, this is our experience of it, and the message Jesus sends in this foreboding text is that we not ignore it, but recognize that what is playing out is not the result of evil prevailing or causing all of this distress. According to Jesus, all of this transpires as the result of God's intervention. It is what Barbara Brown Taylor calls the "gravitational pull of the Kingdom of God drawing near."

This is a narrative of displacement, where the foundations of what has characterized the spirit of the world are giving way to the foundation of the Kingdom that began to emerge at the cross where the power of the world's spirit was irretrievably shattered as the love of God poured out over the broken. When foundations fail, the buildings anchored in them begin to pull apart and tumble. Occupants in vain try to hold them together—they are overcome by the collapse. Jesus is telling us that displacement is itself destructive and awful, but necessary before re-building occurs. The systems of the world—the immense structures if you will—built into a foundation devoid of God, these systems of social disparity, income inequality, inequitable justice, narrowed opportunity, unchecked self-interest, naked aggression and the thirst for power, popularity, and possession are faltering under the weight of God's kingdom brought to bear on them. In some instances the slippage is almost imperceptible as displacement is incremental—in others it is dramatic and swift as forces shift and collapse is unmistakable. Whether large or small, the message remains the same: our redemption is embedded in what is causing anxiety.

The crucifixion of Jesus was, for his immediate followers, the cause of unbearable anxiety. The hopes for what Jesus envisioned and taught all seemed to die with him on the cross. Whatever his followers had anticipated for the kingdom turned to dust in his last breath. Their future was upended and they went into hiding. Three days later they learned that the cause of their anxiety was actually the source of their redemption, and their future changed from upended to unending! Reality was changed, and the gates of hell would indeed not prevail as the kingdom began to sweep across their world.

For his immediate followers, Jesus' fateful words gave them courage to face what lay ahead as Divine displacement commenced. Mark retrieved this narrative for his original audience amid desolation, chaos and bewilderment to give hope and reassurance—the kingdom prevails. For us, the message is to remain vigilant that we not slip into complacency. The distress is real and urgent, but it is a necessary feature of displacement. Jesus was drawn to places of desolation, where chaos reigned, where bewilderment and despair lived in quiet desperation. In those very centers of turmoil, Jesus brought redemption. This is where his followers today are called. Where is desperation? Where is desolation? Where is there chaos? Where are the places of collapse in our world? Wherever they are is where we are called to bring the message of redemption and hope; to say that there is a coming day when

the displacement will be fulfilled, when the longings of the human heart for love, peace, and joy will be met.

Attending to this is our call as we anticipate Christ's return. Exactly how or when that will occur is not our concern. Those anticipating Christ's initial appearance largely missed it as it came unexpectedly in an unanticipated way. We shouldn't arrogantly assume we've got it all figured out through our theological prowess and charts. What we do know is sufficient for the moment: Christ will come again. Ours is to watch—to be mindfully attentive to the places of anxiety, to bring the message and ministry of redemption to the despairing. The kingdom is emerging all around us, and the King is on his way. AMEN