

Advent 1 B  
Isaiah 64:1-9  
Mark 13:24-37  
November 30, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill  
Wimberley UMC  
Notes not for publication

If you pay attention to this sort of thing, you may have noticed that sometimes the first Sunday of Advent happens in November, right after Thanksgiving, and sometimes it happens a week later, in December. Like I said, you may not pay attention to such things, but I have to, and when Advent immediately follows Thanksgiving, as it has this year, it's always a grinding gearshift in my head. We move from pumpkins to Christmas trees in the space of about 8 hours, from the time we go to bed Thursday night with full stomachs until we wake up the next morning to Christmas music everywhere. I came home from my mother's, and the turkey placemats were still laid out on the table, staring up at me, unaware that their time had come and suddenly gone.

Keep awake, Jesus says, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. If you're paying attention to the seasons from the perspective of the church, it's even weirder. Because we've lit this first Advent candle by the name of Hope, yet our scriptures don't sound as hopeful as scary. This whole thirteenth chapter of Mark is apocalyptic, talking about the end times, kind of half in code, talking about suffering and the moon and sun going dark, and the stars falling out of the sky—read the part just preceding today's passage to get a good scare. In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah has the people standing guilty before God as a filthy cloth, fading away like leaves blown by the wind. Is this really what we're waiting for this Advent, what hope

looks like? Isn't this actually more like what we're already living through? Maybe the people always predicting the end of the world are onto something. Looks pretty scary out there.

I don't know whether we can read into the headlines of the day, from global warming to Wall Street to Mumbai, the imminent arrival of Jesus, riding in just over the horizon. But we can see in the midst of the crisis the yearning of the creation for fulfillment, the cry of the world to God. We yearn for the power of God, yearn to see it at work, for we know that's what it's going to take. We know it will have to be the hand of God that sets all of this right. So we cry out with Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—...so that the nations might tremble at your presence!" (64:1-2). We want God to come and fix it, make it better.

At least we want this on some level—yet we also kind of don't. Maybe what we really want is for Christ to come with a big, impressive light show. But we don't like waiting for it, nor do we like the pesky uncontrollability of Jesus. So we look someplace else for some other big, impressive light show. And what a coincidence, but here we are at the best time of year for big shows. We just experienced one on Black Friday, those crazy ones of you who joined me in working the sales. The paper was delivered on Thanksgiving Day, fat with ads, full of promise—the promise that the magical combination of the perfect gift at a rock-bottom price would be ours, if only we were really committed and showed up early enough. I'm always glad to go shopping that

day, oddly enough—it's just not that often that I get to go by myself. But once again I found that if you were going looking for the fulfillment of the promise, you were likely to be disappointed. If you showed up for the great deal at 6:00 a.m., they ran out at 5:55. If you were banking on the 25% off coupon, it didn't apply to whatever you stood in line forever to buy.

Now, you may be saying, of course, how stupid do you have to be to go shopping the day after Thanksgiving? But my point is that this is the time of year when we will most clearly hear the call of consumerism, whether online, on TV, in the catalogs or at the mall, promising to make it all better for us. Commercialism is an easy mark for preachers at Christmas time, and I'm not condemning gift giving. But our purchasing is like a drug for many of us, an activity that 1) saps us of our resources and 2) focuses us on something other than what is going on inside our hearts and the hearts of the people around us. This became tragically clear early Friday morning with the death of Jymitai Damour at a Wal-Mart in New York. He was a temporary worker there, trying to keep the doors closed until the 5:00 a.m. opening, but the people who had lined up hours earlier didn't want to wait any longer. They pushed through the glass doors, and Damour was trampled as the mob of shoppers surged through the opening they had made.

"Tear open the heavens, and come down!" we cry. Such is the yearning in us, and such is the danger when our yearning is misplaced, or focused on the wrong goal. The season of Advent is a time to refocus and to look ahead, around and outside of what we already always see. I think that's part of the harshness of this kind of

scripture text—it shakes us out of our slumber, our perpetual mental nap. The urgency behind these passages, the urgency the people of God felt so many centuries ago—these are an alarm that awakens us from our daydreams, the ones that whisper to us that a new credit card with zero interest for six months will be our path to peace. Just like pain is the body’s warning mechanism, the yearning and urgency we feel when we see chaos around us must be ignored. They are the voice of God in us, moving us to a new place, signaling the coming of a new order.

Living in chaos, however, is exhausting. It can be scary, and even paralyzing. So what are we to do? I believe it is the job of the church to live in the tension between what is and what we believe will be. We begin by being a place where the curtain is pulled back a little, to reveal the truth, however painful or challenging. We must start with ourselves, with looking soberly at the places in our lives where we know we need God to come. That also means looking at what we do to protect ourselves from God, to keep from having to change. What kinds of rationalizations do we use to explain our part of the world’s chaos? If we will sincerely ask and truly listen, God will show us where the change needs to come and how we can stop hindering God and start cooperating. This isn’t about blame and feeling guilty; it is about honesty and willingness to trust that God means to save us, whatever that may mean for each of us. I can think of no more fitting task for Advent than to earnestly seek the help and power of God.

Then I believe it is the job of the church to wait for the Lord with purposeful waiting, waiting in hope. One of my favorite words in Spanish, you’ve heard me say

before, is *esperar*. It means to wait, but it also means to hope and to expect, and it's also what expectant mothers do. Active, purposeful *esperanza*—living into what is not yet, allowing ourselves to be pulled along, tugged by the heartstrings, prodded into action, changed today by what is coming tomorrow, very much like a pregnant woman. It's the job of the church during Advent and all the time to look to God to light a fire under the whole world, to burn kindling and boil water within creation to bring forth a new order of justice and mercy. It's our job is to know that, as we submit ourselves as clay in the strong hands of the potter, our lives are not just about what is. Our lives are tools for God to use to create what will be.

Maybe to you that doesn't feel like a very heartwarming Advent message. But the message of the gospel for us this season goes much deeper than some superficial, cable TV daydream. And it addresses the real need we and the whole world feel. The coming of Christ is no small thing. Manger and swaddling clothes aside, this event will indeed be earth-shattering. But what we must remember is that this holy plan promises to speak to our truest longing, our deepest need, filling the hole inside us and the bellies of the hungry, healing the wounds of our hearts and the bodies of the poor, correcting our direction and giving purpose to those ground down by toil. The action of God upon us through the coming of Christ is a momentous thing, a powerful force out of our control. But it is also good news for us, the best news, for us and for all the world. God has promised not to leave us to ourselves, and the best of that promise will come when we are in touch with the depth at which we need it.

There is a little-known fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm entitled "Der Mond," or in English, "The Moon." It is a short tale that was adapted by

the German composer Carl Orff into an opera in one act. It involves four young rowdy misfits from a land where there is no light – no sun in the day and no moon or stars at night. These are people who “walk in darkness.” Sound familiar?

These lads travel to another land where they find the moon hanging on a tree. They steal the moon and bring it back to their land where they charge people money for their use of the moonlight. Eventually, as happens to all of us, they grow old and die. As each one dies, one quarter of the moon is cut away and buried with one of its owners until there is no more light. In the opera, Petrus, “who rules the sky,” descends to the dead (sound familiar?) and retrieves the four pieces of the moon and hangs it in the sky for the benefit of all.

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[www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons\\_that\\_work](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work))

Do not be afraid, but remember the nature of the one whom we await. If the moon does fall, the who is coming will be light for the whole world. As one writer put it, “Yes, I know that there are people who want to say that the Day of the Lord should inspire terror, but we know something that they don't seem to realize: the person we call Lord is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, who taught and healed, who welcomed the outcast and broke bread with anyone willing to eat with him” (Sarah Dylan Breuer, [www.thewitness.org](http://www.thewitness.org), 11/25/05). Keep the season, sisters and brothers, with our eyes on the light of hope, waiting and expecting the coming of Christ with fire and stars and glory, to give us exactly what we need, just exactly our heart’s true desire.

Children: What are some problems that you know how to fix? Things that break (figure out how they work and fix them), things that get dirty (wash or clean them), people whose feelings we hurt (say we’re sorry). But can you think of problems that are so big that only God will be able to help us fix them?