

Be Careful What You Ask For

Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

Ah, Christmas. The music, the rosy cheeks on little children, the light of Christ breaking into the world. Today we start Advent, the church season of preparation for Christmas. Today we start our official watch for the arrival of the big day (though, of course, at Cracker Barrel and WalMart they've had their Christmas merchandise out for six weeks). Why, then, at church, where we have the decency to wait for our preparations for Christmas to wait for today, does the lectionary give us this dark, foreboding passage from the Gospel of Mark? Why do we read about the end times on a day when we look forward to some of our favorite times of the year? The answer is, be careful what you ask for, because you might just get it.

First, we remind ourselves what the lectionary is. In the "liturgical church", in the ecumenical church, in those branches of Christianity that admit to a fundamental connection to other denominations, we often use the lectionary to determine the passages on which we preach. The lectionary is created by a council of leaders from the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian and other churches. Last Thursday I met with four other pastors, all from that group of churches. For one reason or another we began to tell how long since we had been ordained. Fifteen years, said the first one. Ten, said the second and eleven said the third. They looked at me. One of them said, "Mike, it's got to be at least 20 years since your ordination."

I told them, “Well, thirty-eight. Thirty-eight years since my ordination.” Ronald Reagan had just started his second term. The IU Hoosiers would win their last championship two years later. One of them had not yet been born. They were astonished. I added that when I attended seminary our professors told us not to use the lectionary. “Too Catholic, too Lutheran,” they said.

My younger colleagues at our Thursday gathering all “religiously” use the lectionary. As I do today. And we talked about the difficulty this passage from Mark poses. This conversation between Jesus and his disciples happens, in Mark, *right* before the Last Supper, his arrest and all the rest of it. According to the rhetorical device call the Recency Effect, this placing at the end of his earthly life in the Gospel of Mark gives this episode great importance. So the fact that Jesus chooses to speak about the end times in this context is potent. “Be on guard! Be alert...!” he says. “What I say to you, I say to everyone...” he says. He talks about stars and planets plummeting into the earth. Matthew contains a bit of this talk. Luke and John do not. What shall we make of this apocalyptic prophecy in Mark? At the end of Jesus’ ministry? On the first Sunday in the bright, shiny season of Advent?

Be careful what you ask for, because you might just get it. Following Jesus does not lead us into some kind of protected Shangri-la, some paradisaical existence where nothing bad can happen to us and only blessings attend us. Following Jesus leads us into a vulnerable, unprotected place. It leads us *through the fear and the anxiety and the danger of life into spiritual safety*. Thomas Merton was an American

Roman Catholic monk, a mystic, a brilliant thinker on the topic of the contemplative life. As a silly, proud Presbyterian raised all those years ago, I resisted taking him seriously. But in the past decade or so I have found solace in his thoughts. After reading the Book of Jonah Merton wrote, "God makes us ask ourselves questions most often when He intends to resolve them. He gives us needs that He alone can satisfy, and awakens capacities that He means to fulfill. Any perplexity is liable to be a spiritual gestation, leading to a new birth and a mystical regeneration."

What questions from Jesus' speech in Mark 13 does God ask us to resolve? Why must the world end in a conflagration? What does Jesus require of me as I await either my own death or the world's? I mean, these are not small questions. These are not happy Christmas questions. But in fact Jesus came into this world to further his own plan, to resolve the conflict between his righteousness and our unrighteousness. This furtherance requires judgment. And we do not like judgment. Our culture has conditioned us to prefer a kind of easy, soft acceptance of all opinions and approaches. Please do not hear me teeing up a condemnation of any particular side on any issue. I am, rather, reminding us that God has opinions. And it is our job to ascertain to the best of our ability what God thinks about anything and everything. We need to know, in a word, God's judgment. Perhaps it would help to remind ourselves of another meaning of that word. Judgment in our time and place normally means the unjust, snap condemnation of certain opinions and positions.

But judgment also means the ability to determine right and wrong, wise and

unwise. Jesus, as God, knows right and wrong, wise and unwise. And he calls upon his followers, whether in the Gospel of Mark or today, to attend to his judgment. For example, recently a few white players on the West Vigo football team racially harassed two black teammates. Their coaches had to have known but turned blind eyes and deaf ears to the situation. One of the black players' parents approached an administrator at the school. Nothing happened. The team came to our neighborhood (and no doubt others) selling trash bags and cookies and whatnot to raise funds for the program. I posted on our neighborhood Facebook page that I would not give them any money and I hoped others would not, either.

Several people pushed back *hard*, saying I did not know the whole situation and the boys who physically assaulted the black kids in the shower and imitated monkeys in front of them in public were “good kids”. In my *judgment* they are no better nor worse than any other fallen human being. But I do not retreat one inch from my conviction that Jesus utterly condemns their behavior. And the episode makes me examine my own actions. If Jesus indeed will return in a way that we may ask for, but regret when he comes, how do I want to have behaved in the meanwhile? Be careful what you ask for, because you might just get it. Jesus came to this world the first time as an innocent babe. He has told us he will return in power and judgment. We must incorporate that revelation into our expectations for what he has in store for us.

Jesus has promised to return to this life. Prepare for his return by not only examining, but correcting your own life. Jesus brings judgment. Thank God!