

Come Quickly, Lord Jesus: Advent 2020

Week 1 Text: Mark 13:24-37

Background

Bible Translations

NRSV: the standard academic translation. You'd be hard pressed to find a peer-reviewed Biblical Studies journal that favors a different translation in quotations. It's written in a more academic style, with an emphasis on accurate single word translations at the expense of colloquial English.

CEB: One of the newest translations (published 2011). It was sponsored by several mainline denominations and it pitched at an everyday, rather than academic, English reader. "Accuracy" for the CEB is defined in terms of the reader's understanding rather than a dictionary's precise translation of terms.

The Gospel According to Mark

The first week of Advent marks the first week of the new church year. In the Revised Common Lectionary, where we get the readings for Sundays, this means we are focusing on a different gospel. We just finished up Matthew, and for 2021 we are going to be reading from the gospel according to Mark.

Mark is the shortest of our four gospel books, and it was the first to be written. Matthew and Luke both contain many passages that are identical to the passages in Mark (our text today can be found almost word for word in Matthew 24). Mark is unique in its almost terse prose. Everything seems to happen "immediately," and the end of the world is imminent.

It's fitting that we are starting the liturgical "year of Mark" off with this passage from chapter 13. Advent is the season when we contemplate both the coming of Christ in the infant Jesus *and* anticipate the second coming of Christ at the end of all things. Our passage this week gives a description of some of the "signs of the times" that anticipate the coming of Christ in glory. And it also says that we do not know when the master/head of the household will come. We know it's happening soon (because for Mark, everything is always happening *right now*), but all we can do is stay alert and wait.

Some historical (and botanical) context

One important date: 70 CE/AD

- Roman Imperial forces attacked and destroyed Jerusalem, including the Jewish temple.
- Many scholars believe that the gospel of Mark was written around this time

One academic term: apocalyptic literature

- "apocalypse" literally means "unveiling" or "revealing"
- As a literary genre, "apocalypse" refers to writing about some special revelation about the end times received from a heavenly messenger (e.g. Daniel, Revelation of John)
- The destruction of Jerusalem was a sort of end of the world, and writings of the time describe it in the same way that Daniel describes the end of the empire of his day.

One botanical fact: Figs produce an early crop (breba figs) in the spring before the normal summer crop ripens in July.

Questions

1. On a first read of the passage from Mark what stuck out at you? Was there anything surprising? What did you notice this time that you might not have noticed if you read this last year?

2. How do you think the original readers of Mark would have understood this speech of Jesus? What is different between 1st century Jewish Palestine and 21st century America? What is the same?

3. What do you think God is revealing to us in this passage? Where do you see God in these verses?

4. What are we “keeping alert” for today? What might God be calling you to do? What are we waiting for?

Mark 13:24-37 New Revised Standard Version

The Coming of the Son of Man

24 “But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

25 and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

26 Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27 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.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

28 “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. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The Necessity for Watchfulness

32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 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. 35 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, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Mark 13:24-37 Common English Bible

24 “In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. 25 The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. 26 Then they will see the Human One coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. 27 Then he will send the angels and gather together his chosen people from the four corners of the earth, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven.

A lesson from the fig tree

28 “Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that he’s near, at the door. 30 I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until all these things happen. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

32 “But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the angels in heaven and not the Son. Only the Father knows. 33 Watch out! Stay alert! You don’t know when the time is coming. 34 It is as if someone took a trip, left the household behind, and put the servants in charge, giving each one a job to do, and told the doorkeeper to stay alert. 35 Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know when the head of the household will come, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows in the early morning or at daybreak. 36 Don’t let him show up when you weren’t expecting and find you sleeping. 37 What I say to you, I say to all: Stay alert!”