

**Advent 1, 29 November 2020**  
**Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37**  
**On the Road to Readiness**  
**First Mennonite Church**

What a subversive theme for this year's Advent season! What a revolutionary theme to use during a time of a global pandemic when we are told to stay at home and **not travel**. Yet, we at FMC are going to defy the public health orders to stay at home and embark on a journey. This season of Advent we are heading **on the road!**

Before anyone gets on the phone and reports us to the authorities, let me clarify this by saying that we aren't going to physically move from one geographical location on the map to another. We aren't going to travel the Yellowhead to Edmonton so that we can go shop at the West Edmonton mall. We aren't going to get on a plane and fly to a Mexican beach as much as some of you might like to. Rather the hopes and prayers of all of those who were involved in planning for this advent theme is that we will all **travel spiritually to be closer to Jesus**, our Lord and Saviour.

But the question for today is, are you ready? Are you ready for the arrival of God's world where swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, ready for a world pervaded by justice and peace? Are you ready for a world where the rich won't devour the poor, where oppressors won't kneel on the necks of the oppressed, but a world where everyone will "sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid" (Micah 4:4)? Are you ready for a better world, longing for a world that runs on justice and not on the blood of the innocent?



Generally speaking, being ready for travel, a concert, or any event is a multi-faceted job. We must be mentally ready, rested and alert. We must be physically ready, curiously ready for the unexpected, relationally ready, emotionally ready, acknowledging any baggage we are carrying, what worries we have, are we being realistic? And we must be spiritually ready. Are you ready?

In today's reading from the gospel of Mark, we are invited to be ready for the disruption, revolutionary, earth shaking changes that will take place when God comes among us. Are we ready to meet God, see God, hear God's voice, and be ready to follow God where ever God asks us to go, ready to do what God tells us to do, ready to say what God wants us to say?

Are you ready for God's Advent into the world?

In the gospel of Mark, the are you ready question was put to the disciples by Jesus. The portion of scripture Elfrieda read is part of a larger section where Jesus is responding to the disciples who are awed by the size and beauty of the Jerusalem temple. *"Teacher, look! What awesome stones and buildings!"* (13:1). Jesus's response? He predicts the coming destruction of the temple (13:2). Not only will the grand temple be destroyed, but there will also be tribulations like false messiahs and false prophets (13:14-23), heavens breaking, stars falling, and the convulsion of the world. There is no corner of creation that is unaffected by the advent of God. And the disciples ask, *"when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"*

The disciples wanted to know when the temple would be destroyed as its destruction would have certainly meant the end of the world as they knew it.

This is just an aside, but in the year 40, the Roman emperor Caligula tried to place



a huge statue of himself in the Temple, an abomination to the Jewish people. Marks describes it as the desolating sacrilege (Mark 13:14). Before Caligula could do it, however, he was assassinated. But, in AD 70, during the Jewish-Roman war, the Roman army, led by

Emperor Titus, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, bringing an end to the Jewish nation.

Ever since the disciples asked the calendar question, others have asked, "When will this be?" When will Jesus return? What are the signs of the times when the world will come to an end?

Whenever times are tough, including the time we are currently in—a virus pandemic—there are date-setters who attempt to predict the days or years of Christ's return or when the world will end, only to find themselves (and those who believed them) disappointed.

Jesus says no to the calendar question. *About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father* (Mark 13:32).

How can we be ready to see God, hear God, and know the will of God? Jesus tells a brief story of a man going on a journey and leaving his servants in charge of the household. While the owner is gone, the servants are expected to keep the place operational and be ready to welcome the owner upon his return. Three times Jesus repeats the warning "Keep awake" (vv. 33, 35, 37).

For us, in this first Sunday of Advent, Jesus' warning is our reminder to prepare for God's arrival at the end of the age, a time for us to prepare for God's advent through self-examination. But in the context of Mark's story Jesus gives the warning just before the passion story. Jesus uses the times of the Roman night as a warning.

Will the owner of the house return in the evening?  
Will the owner of the house return at midnight?  
Will the owner of the house return at the cockcrow?  
Will the owner of the house return at dawn?

Surely, the disciples would be ready after hearing these things. After all, for 3 years they walked the same road as Jesus walked, ate the same food as Jesus ate, listened to the very words Jesus spoke, and saw Jesus perform acts of healing. Surely, they would be ready.

Immediately after this story we enter the Passion story where Jesus is arrested, tried first by the religious leaders, then by Pilate, sentenced to death, and finally

hung on a cross to die. Were the disciples ready to welcome the owner of the house in the evening, at midnight, at the cockcrow, and at dawn?

Marks says no. The disciples weren't ready.

- In the evening Judas betrayed Jesus to the authorities for 30 pieces of silver.
- At midnight the disciples slept while Jesus prayed. A short time later they tried to mount a violent defense after the religious leaders showed up with a crowd carrying swords and clubs. When that failed, they all fled.
- We all know what happened at the cockcrow—Peter denied knowing Jesus.
- At dawn when Jesus was before Pilate, everyone wanted Jesus dead.

Though the disciples weren't ready, others were. I think of Mary who, at first, was greatly

perplexed/troubled by the words of the angel who told her she would bear a son. Though the angel Gabriel called Mary a favoured one she didn't feel favoured, at least, not at first. But Mary knew enough of the real, living God of Israel, that a message from God might be something to be perplexed/troubled about. The angel came to tell her that she had been selected by God to change the whole world through the Advent of the Messiah. Young, poor Mary was so alert, so spiritually prepared to recognize this encounter as a message from God that she said: *here am I,*



*a servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.*

How could Mary see and know when the disciples couldn't?

No one knows when God will show up. Only God knows. But, in between the times we need to watch, be awake, be discerning, be ready.

You see, Jesus main concern is not to give a detailed outline of when the world will come to an end; rather his interest is preparing his disciples for the long haul. In the kingdom Jesus has brought, you and me, God's followers, have a job to do while the owner is away. And our job is not to sit around speculating on when the world will end. Our job is not to do nothing. Our job is not to sit around at home complaining about how bad things are. Our job is not to flee from all the problems out there. Our job is to get out there. Get our hands dirty. Live our faith today. Like the prophet Micah said, "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. Don't sit around and wait for the sweet by and by.

Too often Christians, in their desire to get to heaven, forget all about living today. In our desire to get to the land that is fairer than day, we have polluted the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the very earth that God pronounced good. In our preoccupation to get out of this often gloomy and dark world, we have given no thought to the violence we participate in. In our desire to be with Jesus, we have so often neglected to see Jesus right in front of us. "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matt.25:43,45).

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul is also writing to a group of Christians wondering about the calendar question of when Jesus will return. Paul's solution is simple: "So then let us not fall asleep as others do but let us keep awake and be sober...put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation."

These aren't flee into the hills, hide in a bunker, stick your head into the sand, cower in your home, images; rather they're images of vigilance, action, mission, service, taking the stance of a divine combatant, ready to seize every opportunity to exercise the warfare of love. In other words, do what you can do to live faithfully here and now. Don't listen to those false preachers who tell you the end is near so that you can escape.

Our task is not to figure it all out; instead our task is to be faithful to Jesus today, to live the life of a disciple here and now, and leave the future up to God.

We're beginning a season of waiting and preparing. Four weeks of spiritual preparation so that we can see, experience, and hear God's advent among us. And the spiritual disciplines we need in the middle of a virus pandemic to get ready for God's Advent among us and in our world requires us to pack differently than other years.

This advent season is starting out very different for us. When the new government regulations around the number of people who can be together for worship arrived late Wednesday, the worship committee and church council needed to be ready to make decisions quickly. Everyone involved in today's worship service needed to be ready to adjust to a new reality. We will have to figure out how we move forward in the weeks to come.

Am I ready? I'm not sure. As people of faith, I know that part of what is required of us is to sit with the unknown, with the mystery, with the questions, with the messiness, and try and wait for God, especially where we most need answers.

And I have so many questions like, when will we have a vaccine for COVID-19? Can reconciliation really take place between us of European ancestry and the Indigenous peoples of this land? Will you ever again be able to hug your children or grandchildren? Have large family gatherings? Will I be able to see my mum this Christmas season? I doubt it. When will we be able to see our loved ones who live a plane ride away?

Getting ready for God's Advent this year requires us to pack differently. We need things in our suitcase that will keep us awake to God's Advent among us. Are you packed? Are you ready to be on the road?

I ask myself once again, "Am I ready?" Amen.