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# Advent I

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*Much has been said about being in the present.  
It's the place to be, according to the gurus,  
like the latest club on the downtown scene,  
but no one, it seems, is able to give you directions.*

So begins former US poet Laureate Billy Collins's great poem called "The Present." He continues:

*The trouble with the present is  
that it's always in a state of vanishing.  
Take the second it takes to end  
this sentence with a period — already gone.*

*What about the moment that exists  
between banging your thumb  
with a hammer and realizing  
you are in a whole lot of pain?*

What Collins, and his light touch, is shining a light on is the ambiguity of that spiritual advice to Be Present. If you have been to the bookstore in the last 30 years, and wandered over to the Spirituality section, or maybe even cheated on Jesus and peeped a look at the Buddhism section, chances are good that you've found a book with this admonition. Live in the present amidst Uncertainty. Be present. Locate yourself through prayer and breath and presence and attention in the present moment. I don't dislike this message, and of course there is wisdom in living life fully engaged, fully attuned to what is before you, unclouded by the regrets of the past and the worries about the future. And yet, the season of Advent approaches us with a slightly different message. A message you won't likely find in the spiritual section of the bookstore. The message of Advent is Be Futured.

Anticipate the future. Bring the future into the now. That's what Advent is all about. Advent isn't just countercultural in its insistence that we watch and wait, instead of hurry and shop; Advent isn't just countercultural in its insistence that the world is not all glittery smiles and sugary kisses under the mistletoe, but is awaiting judgment, recognition, a visit from the outside; Advent is countercultural in that it invites its adherents to inhabit not merely the Present Moment, but the Future, not our Future, but God's.

The Future doesn't appear like a venue we want to attend. Not if we are reading Mark 13, or for that, just about any of the texts assigned for Advent. The future that, say Mark, has in mind isn't exactly full of holiday parties, peppermint mochas, and Yuletide joy. Its fire, it's the earth quaking, its upheaval of the world in wars and rumors of war, and the terrifying Coming of the Son of Man. Yea, we'll take the Present Moment if that's our prospect for the future.

It's true that Mark 13 is a difficult text, the theme being the End of the World. And its spiritual message is complex and quite ambivalent. On the one hand, we should Keep Awake, and on the other we should Be Afraid. Of course, we don't need the inspiration of our Gospel author to tell us to be afraid of the future. We are already there. We fear the outbreak of more war, the brink of self-destruction that modern war always takes us. We fear the re-emergence of the pandemic, and the mass murder a little invisible virus can wreak. We fear the rising of the oceans, and the warming of the planet, and the violence of modern weather patterns whose only explanation is Climate Catastrophe. It's hard to be positive about the future. We better stay in the present.

But that's just the problem. The Present Moment is far too conservative for followers of Jesus. There is something wrong with the world; something bent, broken, awry, something always incomplete about the present. Jesus came to do much more than baptize the present moment; he came to locate possibilities within the Present so as to awaken his follower's attention for His future. What else is the forgiveness of sins besides an

awareness of God's future amidst our failed pasts; what else is the promise of Resurrection other than God's refusal to accept the present moment of death as the last word; what else is the longing for God's final reign, Jesus' kingdom, than a longing that the present moment be broken, transformed, and made into something new?

As the shopping frenzy crescendos, it's not hard to notice how we inhabit a late-stage capitalism that intends for its citizens to live in the present moment – that moment before the impulse to buy, and the one click that buys; that fractional moment between the rumbling in our tummies and our running off to snag takeout; that moment between thinking we are right and demanding that everyone else agree. The challenge about the present moment is that it's often rooted in impulse, and it lacks a dream, a vision of the future that might inform and transform how we inhabit the present. Jesus didn't come to make us consumers in the present; he came to make us communicants of his future that might redeem the present, and apart from a future of hope, the present can bear little meaning.

When the early Christians talked about the future, yes, they talked about scary and otherworldly matters; yes, they perceived destruction and violence. Let's be charitable towards them: the first century was a time very taken with these sorts of expectations, and Mark was just picking up the religious imagery at hand when he talked about the Son of Man descending through the clouds – he's drawing from Daniel chapter 7 to make a profoundly hopeful point. What's unique about Mark is that when he looks at the future, he sees more than apocalypse, annihilation; his world doesn't end with either a whimper or a bang. For Mark, the end of the world is Jesus. After all the lightning has fallen. After the last tremors of the earth-quaking. After the sun has fallen black. Just when you think it's the end, there is still more. There's Jesus. The one who opened your future – the one who touched you into new life; the one who breathed his spirit of kindness and gentleness upon you; the one whose forgiveness unlocked new adventures and thrilling journeys in your soul – this one will be present in the end.

We often think of the end of the world as the end of time... as the last chapter, the last frame in the film, how the world comes to experience its own demise. The end of the world might come from God, it might come from climate change, but either way we think about the word "end" in terms of a deadline on linear existence. But "end" has another meaning. It can also mean the purpose or the goal of life. As in the "ends justify the means." So when a 5th-century theologian like Gregory of Nyssa says that Jesus is the "end" of creation, he's saying that Jesus is the goal, the hope of what human beings' future might look like, the image of what by grace they might grow into. Mark 13, for me, is less about the literal ending of history, and more about its goal, its purpose, its fulfillment. Perhaps we'd stop fearing the linear end to history so much

if we got clearer on the “purpose” or “goal” of history.

When I say Jesus is the end, I’m saying that in him we see God’s intention and God’s promise for the shape of creation. And to Be Futured is to live in anticipation of this future. This means we evaluate everything backwards. We see what place it takes in the end of the world, and we estimate its significance today accordingly. A cup of coffee and a tender hand on the shoulder offered to a colleague who’s having a hard day may seem an inefficient use of time to a work-study consultant, but it looks like the end of the world. A desk-off in which two colleagues fight about the tidiness of a shared office may seem vital at the time, but it doesn’t belong in the end of the world.

A weary afternoon spent at the bedside of a dying relative may seem hopeless and miserable at the time, but at the end of the world we’ll see it’s an icon of how God abides with us.

Another 30 minutes pushing your daughter on a swing – and be aware congregation – 30 minutes of swing pushing is a long time – may seem like a less productive use of time when one could be home tinkering with a sermon; but the playground where children play in freedom and joy, fully present to sounds of life, the airplanes and the dogs and the other children, surely that joy is more in tune with the end, than hunched shoulders over a screen indulging its perfectionist tendencies.

If you’re in a quandary about how to live your life or facing a crossroads of truth or virtue, ask yourself the backwards question, does this belong in the end of the world – its finality and purpose? Because remember: the end of the world is Jesus.

When we sing ‘Lo he comes with clouds descending’, as we did to begin our worship, we’re not celebrating a correct prediction of the timing of the world’s conclusion or even hoping that on judgement day we’ll be going upstairs rather than downstairs. We’re saying that in Jesus God has shown us what the world was created for. It was created for perfect relationship between God and humanity, human beings with one another, and humankind with the whole created order. And in Jesus we see all these things made flesh.

Our Advent faith, here this morning with the Gospel of Mark open before us, is not that we know the day or the hour, but that we understand the purpose of all things behind the days and the hours. We know there the end of the world is real, but we need not fear it. We need not fear it because we have already seen it. The end of the world is Jesus. The One who has met us on life’s way; who has redeemed our pasts, and loved us into futures we could never open for ourselves. Christians are called to be counter-cultural; we’re not just called to be present to our lives; we are invited to Be Futured to Jesus’s.