FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT—*HOPE*

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Watch It!* Mark 13:24-37

The passage we just heard is not something most people would associate with Christmas, let alone the first Sunday in the “official” countdown to Christmas—the First Sunday of Advent. The passage is not one we would ordinarily associate with the notion of “Hope.” In fact, as I prepared this sermon, I and members of the Bible Study group came across several commentators who expressed the same surprise and exasperation.

One of them suggests that the dark and ominous words of this passage is a way of preventing the church “from sliding into the pagan comforts of the pre-Christmas season,” and that Mark’s apocalyptic predictions are designed to throw “cold water over a church that sees the arrival of the Messiah in sappy, sentimental ways.”

Well, ok, but…ouch!

It helps to remember that the words Mark recorded for us are the words of Jesus, himself, the adult Jesus who has seen a great deal of the world he into which he was born—the world *for* which he was born. It was a world very much like ours—a world filled with violence, corruption, and uncertainty.

Not one to quietly suffer hypocrisy or corruption, it also helps to remember that Jesus says these prophetic things shortly after he had cleansed the Temple—that episode of turning over the money changers’ tables and driving out the animal sellers [11:15-16].

He had accomplished at least two things that day: he made a decisive stand regarding what he thought of the Temple system, and he had done it in such a way that was an obvious protest, a direct challenge that was not going to be ignored. Indeed, what Jesus did *could not* be ignored.

What Jesus did in this part of his life is actually the same thing that he did by being born. His humble birth, the earthly parents to whom he was entrusted, and the peasant life he grew-up living—all of this was of the same cloth as his words in this morning’s passage. They all tell of a time and the necessity of the end of the current social and political arrangements. They *must* end in order for the reign of God to be established.

All of the corruption that left the people impoverished while the ruling elite—the royal, Temple, and Roman—continued to grow rich—this was *not* the way God wanted God’s beloved people to live. Not then and not now. Not the peasants, but also not the leaders who were supposed to be good shepherds who protected and guided the peoples’ lives together.

Thus, in the days that followed Jesus’ actions in the Temple he continued to talk about how even such monolithic and seemingly entrenched and immovable structures must and *will* give way to make room so that the justice and peace of God would reign in its place. And so, Jesus talked to the disciples about the removal of very Temple itself, but he also meant the systems of control and repression that it represented. All was going to be dis-established, torn down, defeated.

For the first people who heard this Gospel proclaimed this was good news. They were words of hope. Like I said earlier, the people who heard these words first had been through a terrible ordeal.

By the time Mark’s Gospel had been distributed and proclaimed, all that Jesus says has come to pass. Jewish rebels had agitated so consistently that the Romans had finally demolished the Temple. Broken and scattered, the people had suffered all kinds of hardships and misery. They had even been troubled by the rise of false messiahs who promised so much—had brought *false* hope into the broken lives of the people, not the healing strength of real hope.

This is what this passage wants us to have—*real* hope.

Our good news is that Jesus promises us that there is real hope to be had. The difficult news is that it is not going to just fall into our laps. We are going to have to pay attention. We are going to have to be watchful.

So what does that mean to us?

The ancient Israelites who first heard this Gospel were new Christians. Moreover, they were a small minority surrounded by other well-established communities. Even though the Temple had been destroyed and the people scattered, the traditions and the Laws were still deeply rooted in the lives of the people.

The Christian community, as it would come to be known, had a harder road to follow because their road—their customs and traditions—were new and were in the process of being established.

We do not have that problem. For us, the message of watchfulness is something we have heard many times before. In fact, we may even have begun to wonder what we are waiting for.

Are we waiting for Jesus’ return—that is: the apocalypse Jesus speaks about in the passage we heard? Some of us are, and that is fine because what he says is true: we do not know when that is going to happen.

However, I wonder (and I hope) that what most of us are waiting and watching for are those places in our lives where the love of Christ might be brought into to the life of the community, into the fabric of our daily lives. Where might those places be and what might they signify?

In this time of interfaith enmity that has caused such devastation and hardship, we especially find ourselves watching with horror and sadness the war in Gaza and Israel. It began on October 7, with shock for the vicious assault to hundreds of Israeli men, women, and children. It then escalated to shock and disgust when the bloodbath also became a hostage situation. It seemed that there was no limit to the violence and cruelty of Hamas.

What has come to pass in the meantime has also rocked us to our core as we have watched the Palestinians in Gaza being destroyed. The Israeli government appears to be absolutely determined to rid the world of every last Hamas member. The problem with absolutes is that they are usually accompanied by very high body counts of non-combatants, too, innocent children, women, and men.

This has been a dark time for so many—even us. Even we, as we gather here each Sunday, as we read the word of God and pray when we are at home. We raise our heads to look and watch but are sometimes bewildered as to what we are watching for.

In those moments, I hope we will remember this passage wherein Jesus promises that even the monoliths will have their day of reckoning, that nothing is so big that it cannot and will not succumb to an even stronger will to dismantle and replace it. Even large Temples will fall. Even one man—the Son of Man, the Messiah—he too will fall, his earthly life will come to an end, but through the love of God, he will rise. The love of God will *not* be defeated.

In those moments, I hope what we will watch for are those places in our lives where people are led to do more than call for more death and destruction, those moments when we come together and work for community peace and unity. They do happen all around us—more than we know. We just have to be willing to be watchful, to take note, and to take a first small, but hope-filled step in the direction of such activities for this is where the light and love of God is to be found. This is where our hope is made real.

Like in the midst of food drives here in our own community. We do one here in our own church, but there are many more throughout the island. Think of it: people all over the island giving food to the Hawaii Foodbank or other such organizations. None of us ask who is going to get the food—Protestant, Jew, Catholic, or atheist—our only criteria is that the food feeds hungry people.

There are also demonstrations that call for peace, for the continuation of the cease-fire in Gaza. There are people who are standing-up and saying no to our country’s continued funding of the Israeli war machine that has crushed the life out of more than 15,000 people in Gaza.

Be watchful of *those* moments, and for those places in our midst. These are what prophet and theologian bell hooks called, “communities of resistance.”

Rather than be depressed or anxious of the darkness that has come upon us, let us be thankful that, if nothing else, the darkness makes those moments of light brighter and more noticeable that they might otherwise have been.

Most of all, let us hear the words of Jesus who speaks of dire things, but never leaves us there. Rather, let us remember and watch for those moments and places wherein we might join with others to bank the fires that will burn brightly in the darkest of nights. Let us speak Christ into the darkness of many hearts for he is our beacon of hope it will not be overcome. Thanks be to God. Amen.