

Advent Fatigue Syndrome

Mark 13: 24-37

Sunday, November 27, 2011—Orion

First Sunday In Advent

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I come from a tradition of charts: End Time Charts:

- Charts that will tell you exactly who will lead the world
- Charts that will tell you when California will fall into the Pacific Ocean
- Charts and what kind of plagues will sweep across the globe
- Charts that will tell you who will go to war against whom and how many will die in those wars
- Charts that will tell you exactly how Christ will return

Many of those charts prominently featured the Soviet Union; those charts have had to be redrawn because the Soviet Union is no more.

Many of those charts assumed Christ would return before the United States got out of Viet Nam, but that was is long over and still Christ tarries.

Because of that tradition, I tend to look at apocalyptic passages like today's Gospel reading from Mark 13 with a certain amount of fatigue; I did that again this past week as I looked at the suggested scriptures; I said, "Oh no, not another apocalyptic passage!"

You might call it "Advent Fatigue Syndrome"—AFS. Why not? Everything's a syndrome these days: why not Advent Fatigue?

I looked back at some of the sermons I've preached in the past from this passage. I found one that I preached back in 1999 that I called, "In Between the Soon and the Not Yet." I loved the title but when I reread the sermon, I realized it was all about a Christian response to Y2K. Remember Y2K? We have a friend who was so worried about his livestock that he refused to go anywhere on New Year's Eve of 1999 because he was so convinced that computer technology would fail and throw our world into a digital apocalyptic chaos.

We laugh about it today, but a dozen years ago many of us were suffering from fatigue because of the dire predictions that were being made.

Today we might call it Advent Fatigue Syndrome. We hear of all kinds of dire predictions and it just wears us out. Have you ever felt as though you were suffering from AFS?

I came down with a case of AFS the other day while watching Fox News. I tend to be fairly conservative and I love Fox News and I love talk radio, but the commercials they air with their dire predictions about impending economic collapse can wear you out.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Samuelson has something to say about dire economic predictions. He says, "The stock market has forecast nine of the last five recessions."

I love that quote! It tells us that some people are *always* predicting disaster. And who can blame them because when disaster finally does come, they can say, "See, I told you this would happen." But when disaster doesn't come, they can say, "Hang on! It'll happen."

"The stock market has forecast nine of the last five recessions."

Quite frankly, it would be easier to dismiss Mark 13 if it had been written by Hal Lindsey or Tim LaHaye or Jerry Jenkins. But it wasn't. These are the words of Jesus and we cannot cavalierly dismiss them.

Ironically, the Revised Common Lectionary prepares us for the First Advent of Christ—Christmas—by drawing our attention to the Second Advent of Christ—his Return. That's a fascinating comparison, especially when one realizes that nearly all of the most religious people of the day missed the First Advent of Christ. Indeed, scripture only records a handful of people who recognized the first coming of the Messiah: Mary and Joseph, a few shepherds, and eight days later in the temple Simeon and Anna.

When astrologers from the East came to pay homage to Christ, the so-called experts in the Hebrew Scriptures knew exactly where to point them—to Bethlehem—but they themselves couldn't be bothered with greeting their Messiah. They were unprepared for him, even though they knew all about him.

It seems logical to me then, that we have to be careful in how we interpret the Second Advent of Christ lest we become such all-knowing experts that when it comes, we miss it as well. We can get so caught up in knowing exactly how Christ will come back that when he does come back, we—like the Hebrews of the First Century—could also miss it.

This past year we've already lived through two highly publicized predictions of the so-called "rapture of the church." The first was on May 21 and the second was on October 21. You know what happened: nothing. There was no rapture.

I take that back: something did happen. Thousands if not millions of Christians developed a severe case of Advent Fatigue Syndrome. Some had cashed in their pensions to put up billboards heralding the return of Christ on May 21, 2011. Unfortunately, they woke up penniless on May 22. Sadly—many of them turned their back not just on their false prophet, but on Jesus Christ.

Others of us developed a milder form of Advent Fatigue Syndrome: we just laughed or mocked or otherwise dismissed those predictions. But that's treading into treacherous territory because Christ would have us take seriously the promise of his Second Advent—just as we take seriously the promise of his First Advent, so we must take seriously the promise of his Second Advent.

Scripture is not trying to add to our Advent Fatigue Syndrome; rather, scripture provides us with a cure for AFS. That cure covers a wide range of symptoms. First, Mark 13 speaks to those whose advent hopes that have become so excited by calculations that conclude, "This is the time!" Mark 13 tells them, "Take heed! Not even Jesus knows when he will return. Do you presume to know more than Christ?" And so in the face of extravagant claims by prophets and their press agents Mark 13 wisely admonishes us, "Don't believe it."¹

On the other hand, there are those whose symptoms of Advent Fatigue Syndrome are feelings of skepticism to any promise that Christ will come again. They've become jaded to the prospect of the return of Christ. Mark 13 likewise corrects them, "Take heed! Keep alert! Prepare for you do not know when your Master will come a-knocking."

Let's face it: the historical signs which many people associate with the end of the world have already occurred—countless times, in fact. That can lead us to wrongly conclude that life will just keep going on and Christ will never return. But let us "learn a lesson from the fig tree: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates" (Mark 13:28f).

Do you realize that the fig tree becomes tender every year? And it puts forth its leaves every year? Perhaps the lesson of the fig tree is that we must be ready every year. Perhaps the lesson of the fig tree is for every generation to live ready for the return of Christ because even if he doesn't return this year, the fig tree will go through the same cycle again next year.

When Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place," I wonder if he meant that every generation will see its share of apocalyptic signs come to pass and false prophets come to preach—that every generation will see its share of fig trees putting forth its leaves. But don't be overcome with Advent Fatigue Syndrome—don't give up the faith when false prophets are exposed and don't become jaded by their endless predictions. Instead, remember that heaven and earth will pass away, but the promises of Christ will forever stand.

¹ Quote from Lamar Williamson, *Mark in the Interpretation Bible Commentary Series*, pg. 240. (Also in the paragraphs which follow).

Advent is inevitable. It comes around every year just as surely as leaves bud on the trees in spring.

Christmas is inevitable. It comes around every year whether we're ready for it or not.

And the Second Coming is inevitable. Just as you prepare for Christ's First Advent, stay prepared for his Second. You never know when you might meet him.

Just because Christ hasn't returned as yet, don't lose heart. Don't lose faith. Don't become fatigued. Keep alert. Put your trust in God's Word and remember that everything else is only temporary.

Let us as faithful followers of Christ echo the words of Joseph Martin—words which were earlier sung by our choir—

Almighty God, we cry to you
When will Messiah come?
When will you wipe our tears away?
When will Messiah come?

Prayer of Confession:

Gracious God, Advent is upon us. Soon we will celebrate the birth of your Son. We should be filled with joy but already we're worn out. Stores and sales, prophets and predictions fill us with fatigue. We know Christmas is coming, but we're not ready. We know Christ is coming back but we're unprepared. Help us to remember that the things of this world are fleeting; you alone are forever. Help us to find your strength in the midst of our weakness.

Help us to find joy in the midst of the chaos that can be Advent. Equip us to ever be ready to receive you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

--DRS, 2011