

North Kildonan United Church

29th November 2020 ~written by Rev. Don Johnson/Peter Latimer

“The Waiting Time”

Isaiah 64: 1-9

I Corinthians 1: 3-9

Mark 13: 24-37

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

Good morning friends. I'm grateful to Peter for conducting today's service and for reading this message. I'm sorry I'm not able to be with you on this first Sunday of Advent but hope to be back in the pulpit next Sunday.

Today we begin a new church year and St Mark will be our guide and companion for most of our gospel readings.

Sometimes the gospel offers us calm and encouraging words, sometimes the teachings are challenging and perhaps a bit confusing. Our reading this day falls more into that latter category.

Think of what we just heard. Jesus is foretelling a time of great tumult and upset, a time when the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, a time when it will seem like the powers of heaven itself have been shaken and the stars will fall from the sky.

"Good Lord", we might be thinking, "*what is the Good Lord saying to us?*" Hardly the kind of text to put on a Christmas card, and if there is good news in today's passage, is it hidden beyond our seeing?

Many have interpreted this passage as an end of the world writing, and some who see it this way have been tempted to put an actual date on when the sky would fall in and Jesus would return in glory. Even though Jesus goes on to warn that only the Father, only God, knows when such an event might occur, suggesting that it is the height of foolishness to try to second guess the plan and intentions of the Almighty.

Let's place this passage within history. The death and resurrection of Jesus was roughly 33 A.D. Mark's gospel was written around 70 A.D. and many who had heard Jesus teach may have told their recollections to Mark, recollections that would include Jesus's prophecy about the fall of the Temple. In 66 A.D. the Roman-Jewish war broke out, a war that was tremendously cruel and brutal, a war that culminated in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The violence of those years would have seemed like the end of the world, which of course it wasn't. But it was the end of a certain way of life for the Jews.

Jewish worship life was transformed by the fall of the Temple. Sacrifices could no longer be offered at the Temple, and since the Temple was gone, religious life was now centred on the local synagogue and the home.

But for Christians, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross was seen as the only once and forever sacrifice needed. No longer were animals to be slaughtered to atone for sins. The blood of Jesus replaced all the blood shed by those unfortunate animals. Access to God was now through God's son, not through Temple worship and animal sacrifice. And every time the people of God remembered the last meal Jesus shared with his friends, they understood that the cup they shared was the blood of Jesus, shed for all for the forgiveness of sins.

So a new way was begun, a new form of access to God, new hope for the world. A faith that included all who would draw near and receive the Gospel, be they Jew or Gentile. A faith based not on the lineage a person was born into, but on a person's second birth at baptism, open to all, God's grace in water and word.

All this and more was achieved by the coming of Christ at his birth in Bethlehem. An event unparalleled in history, an event so holy and so significant that each year we need to prepare ourselves to celebrate anew this humble birth.

So we begin the journey to Bethlehem with Advent, with passages from both Testaments that help us prepare to receive the Christ Child into our hearts and our lives. A time to wait and to wonder, to ponder how deep God's love is for us, to reflect on how full our heart is for Christ. In this waiting we join with the faithful of Old Testament times, of all times, who waited for, longed for a Saviour, a Messiah who would transform and bless life. So we hear stories of how people longed for an end to slavery, longed to be back home, their true home, longed to be at home with God again, longed for reconciliation.

Our Hebrew Scripture echoes that longing: *"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... Yet O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."*

We may be surrounded by Christmas carols in our stores and radio stations, but we are not yet ready to kneel with the shepherds at the manger.

So we wait and hope and prepare our hearts for God's greatest gift, Jesus Christ. And if we could, we would sing:

*"O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lowly exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." Amen.*