

First Sunday in Advent, Year B

Free from God's ETA

Mark 13:24-37

First Sunday in Advent

Analysis by Jonas Ellison

24“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 27Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. 28From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place. 31Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 32But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. 35Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”



From Canva

"When the fig tree finally blooms, you know summer is here and has been for a while."

Diagnosis: So Much Beyond Our Control

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Hopelessness and sorrow still reign

Wait... What year is it? 2023? And the global pandemic is officially over? Remember when that was our 'big problem' and we

awaited the savior of a vaccine to rid us of our isolation, fear, sickness, and death? Alas, the vaccine came, and in record time! No, not to everyone, mind you, but for the wealthy Western world, science came in CLUTCH! It wasn't a sudden deletion of the evil virus. It took a little time and it still sputters on in certain corners. But generally speaking, we're over the hump. We should've thrown a global party, thanked our lucky stars that COVID did not bury us, and moved into happier times like we prayed for. Right?

Well, you know the rest of the story up until the present day. We've merely swapped out the despair of the pandemic with wide-scale war and the death of innocent people. So far, about 6,000 kids alone have died in Gaza and Israel in a month. And the minor maladies that don't make headlines still plague us; things like, cancer, addiction, estrangement, divorce, greed, depression, loneliness, and the familial brokenness that shows up around the Thanksgiving table. Even amid our man-made solutions, hopelessness, and sorrow still cling tightly to us. But do we glimpse the coming of darkness, the falling stars, the shaking of powers in the heavens? (v. 24-25)

Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Why are we still so sad?

If you live in the US, judging by the numbers, things are getting better. A recent article in Vox titled "Wages are rising. Jobs are plentiful. Nobody's happy." says that unemployment is low, it's easy to find a job, and wages are up, especially for people at the lower ends of the income spectrum (even adjusting for inflation). But we're sadder, lonelier, and unhappier than ever.

So what's even the point? The more that we "fix" things, the more we see that life never loses its bite much of the time. As

we speed into secularism, our culture has shrugged off God to try and grab the reins ourselves. And we've gotten pretty good at it. So what gives? Why do our incredible technology and digital social connectedness seem to make us more divided and lonely? Why do we still feel not-Enough (yes, that's a shameless Barbie movie reference there) even though we've kicked the gavel-swinging God to the curb in our secular world? The voice of Gen Z, Billie Eilish, captured the existential heartbreak of her generation in such a lucid way in her song from the movie's soundtrack, "What Was I Made For" (sorry, but if you haven't seen the Barbie movie yet, you had plenty of time). What has happened to our faith in the midst of so much fear? This is the malaise of our day, and religious leaders feel it too.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Can you speed it up, God?

Everyone is thinking it, even if not everyone admits it. If we can't even be happy in this accelerated world where so much is under our control, is God actually real? If so, what is he doing? If it's truly 'God's work, our hands,' haven't our hands done a ton? When is enough enough? We hear all of these words about the second coming in church, but after all this time, is he really coming back?

"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (13:4) That's the question that Jesus' close-friends asked him, even while they were beaming about the beauty of the temple and how great it was. In our day, this translates to how amazing our universities, hospitals, and technological miracles are. But the critical prophesy quickly scatters any and all of our idolatrous delusions. This thing is coming down, y'all.

We may even ask about a timeline of when all of this suffering might end. Still thinking that all things are in our own control, we may want to ask, "Can you speed it up, God?" Maybe we don't want to ask, lest we be exposed for the deepest malady of our darkness. How dare we trust in the work of our hands, but not the hands of God. There's even a scarier thought that doesn't often occur to the modern mind, but rests buried under a thick layer of secular humanism we've all inherited: When the "Son of Man" comes, what will God do with me?

Embrace the spirit
of Advent,
characterized by
penitent honesty
and hope

let go of the pursuit of
perfection and control

Trusting in God's forgiving love

Find the purest essence of renewal and meaning through
spreading love, nurturing kindness, and bestowing
compassion upon others, even amidst the shadows of life's
unknowns.



Prognosis: Letting Go, Letting God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The crucified fig tree

Wallowing as we are with such questions, we may miss the playfully-mischievous grin on Jesus's face as he delivers the truly good news.

"You cannot see me because you're looking for me where I cannot be found. I move in the pain and sorrow. I am here with you there. I'm moving in the world right now in the midst of it all."

When we look at Jesus through the lens of the cross, we begin to see all this good news unfolding for our good. We see God's crescendo hanging on a cross outside of Jerusalem and arising from an empty tomb. God does not work according to our plans, which are far more limited than God's gracious designs.

The image of the fig tree is Hebrew poetry at its finest... In Jesus' desert climate, most trees are evergreen, but not the fig tree (or the olive tree, but that's for another parable). When the fig tree finally blooms, you know summer is here and has been for a while. We can only see God's movement when he passes us by, not when trying to get his ETA.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Freed from control

When this promise strikes our hearts, we see the miracle that, all along, God has been working in our lives. We get to accept God's love as an eternal gift. We get to see fig trees blooming everywhere. We are beloved through Jesus' incarnation, death,

and resurrection. God is (and has been) meeting us in the midst of our death experiences and loving us back to life. There is no timeline because God does not function on limited linear time. Rather, God functions in the eternal now and has anointed us as beloved since before the foundations of the universe. We didn't see God anywhere because we've been looking for God in glory and perfection. But the God that Jesus came to proclaim is a cruciformed God who mysteriously works in lostness, lastness, and death.

But now that our eyes are open, Wow!... Our shoulders relax. Our hands open. Our hearts turn from stone to flesh. We see all of life as an undeserved gift. We cannot keep this God from breaking into our lives and restoring us.

This is why the church gathers every Sunday, to hear the good news, to taste and see that it is good. Christ brings us his freedom and levity. We get to enjoy this gift instead of trying to earn it or control it.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): God finds us and restores us in the dark

Martin Luther once quipped that if he knew the end of the world was coming tomorrow, he'd plant an apple tree. What a way to live. When we stop stressing about a society or a God of perfection, we can lay down our navel-gazing and scorekeeping. This passage takes us right into Advent. As Fleming Rutledge said, "Advent begins in the dark." We really don't know what tomorrow (or next year or the next moment) will bring.

All of us find ourselves in the darkness at one time or another. But the themes of Advent are penitent honesty and hope. Our repentance means letting go of our control, and trusting in God's forgiving love. We stop trying to understand God, and we stop trying to be God. Instead, we trust God, falling into his

arms. One of the most powerful confessions in the world can be found in step one of the Big Book of AA: our life has become unmanageable, and we are powerless to change it. But we are gathered at the foot of the cross. And a contrite heart always gets God's attention.

But even in this penitent honesty, the hope of Christmas meets us. Christ comes to be with us in the midst of our messy humanity. This hope becomes fuller and more vibrant. This is the once-and-future hope that frees us from the endless project of self and turns us outward to steward and enjoy everything and everyone around us (and therefore, the one who looks back at us in the mirror). In our hopeless nothingness and darkness, God has given us new life. Think about Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning or George Bailey after the bridge incident. Life takes on ultimate newness, and we can't help but share this love with others. It's not because we're forced to, not because we have to, but because we get to. We meet our neighbors in the dark with love, care, and mercy.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Freed from Ourselves

Luke 17:5-10

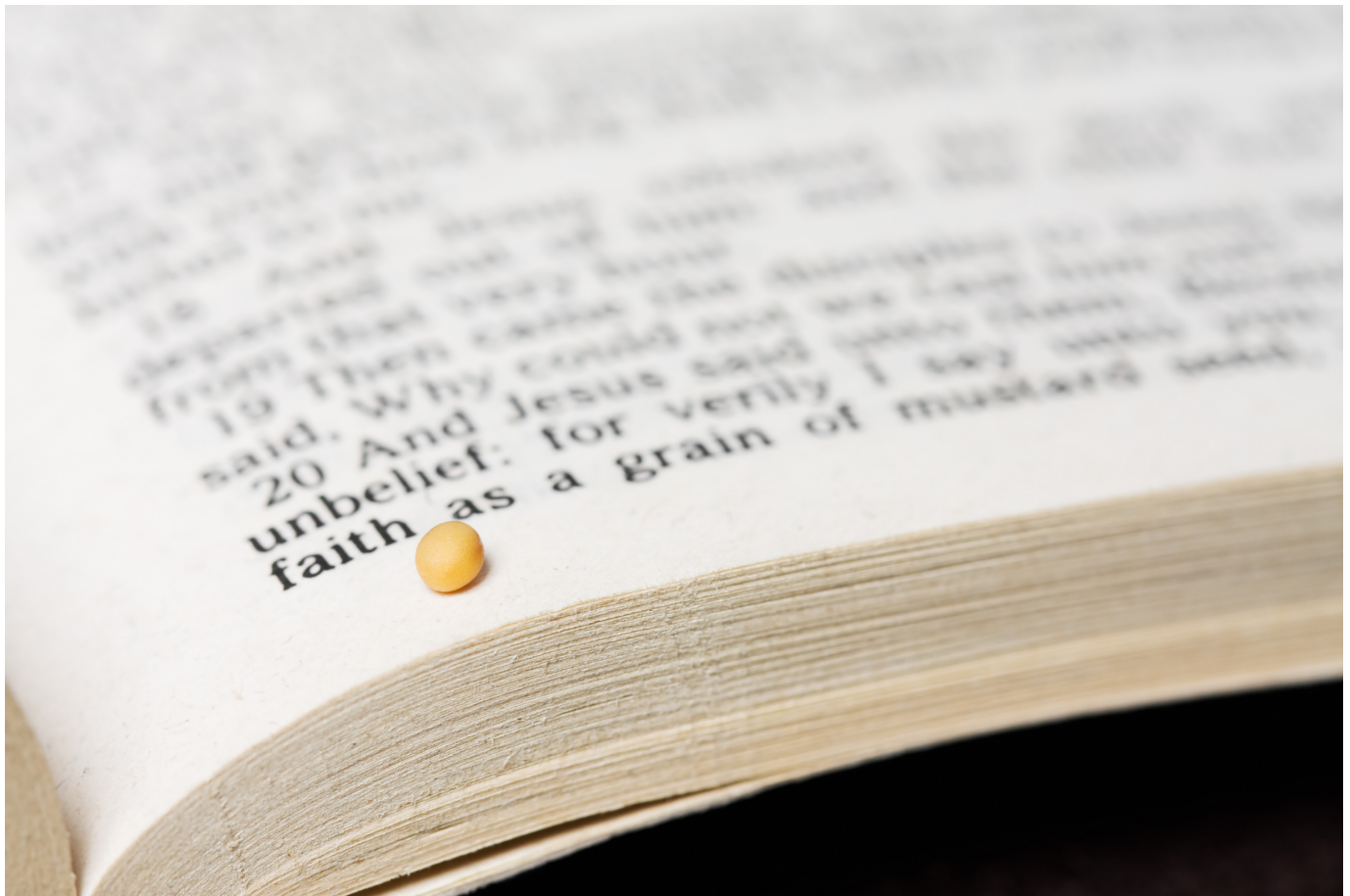
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Jonas Ellison

5The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6The Lord

replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

7Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? 8Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"



Faith Mustard Seed (from Canva)

"God removes our hearts of stone that turn against our selves

and each other and replaces them with beating hearts of flesh. He liberates us from our identity as slaves. In turn, we no longer need to project that slavery onto others. Jesus frees us for the world. ”

DIAGNOSIS:

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Grasping for Control

By default, we are egocentric creatures and the main characters of our own life stories. Why would we think otherwise? We're with and inside of ourselves in every moment of our lives. We are bound to the notion that we are our own gods and the arbiters of life. When life shows us that it cannot be controlled, we reach and grasp for control even more. Even when we turn to faith or spirituality, it's usually done in order to wrest control of our lives. We can sense this desperation in the questions the disciples pose to Jesus in today's passage about how they can have more faith so that they can do all of the miraculous things that Jesus speaks of, like commanding mulberry trees to be uprooted and planted in the sea with the flick of a finger. With more faith, maybe I could pay my bills without stress. Maybe my parasitical addiction will go away. Maybe my child will come out of his room and tell me what's wrong. Sometimes prayer works, but more often it doesn't. How much faith do I need to get this life to budge in my desired direction, Lord?!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): An Unsustainable Way of Life

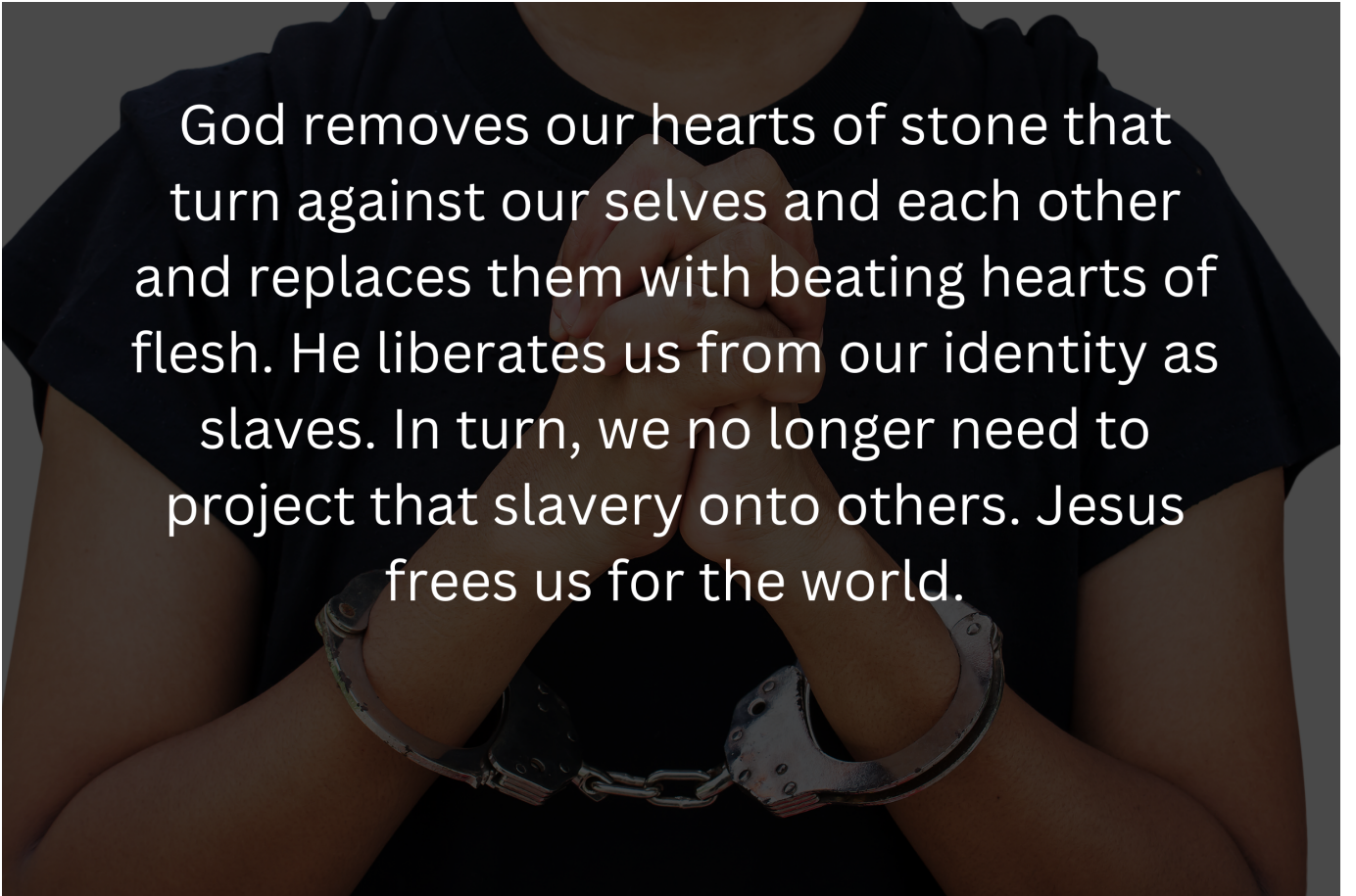
This default way of living is destined to be wrought with anxiety and strife. Life is quick to teach us that we have

control over very little. We are not the creators of the world, nor are we even our own individual creators. Living as if we are gods is a delusional way to relate to life. It's like the pot saying that the potter did not make it (Isaiah 29:16). As pots, we will never be the potters of our lives, even though we might cling to the delusion that we are.

The problem comes when we take for granted the gifts that life brings us. When we fall into the delusion that we deserve the good things, we start to believe that we can "manifest" them on demand. If we cannot manifest more good into our lives through worldly means of power, we tend to strive for it through spiritual means. Our modern secular spirituality is rife with "manifesting our reality." But again, this is living against the grain of how God made the world and the role humans have in it.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Jesus Won't Let Us Be Our Own Gods

When the disciples express this urge to control more of their lives to Jesus, he refuses to engage. If faith is trust that God is God and we are not, Jesus sees that the disciples are going in the wrong direction. They are trying to use Jesus as their own spiritual slot machine. He tells them that they have zero faith—not even a mustard seed's worth. In typical Jesus-fashion, he amps up the law to bring an end to the delusional self-godly ways they are enslaved to. In their enslavement to glory, they project this enslavement onto their fellow humans.



God removes our hearts of stone that turn against our selves and each other and replaces them with beating hearts of flesh. He liberates us from our identity as slaves. In turn, we no longer need to project that slavery onto others. Jesus frees us for the world.

Freed from slavery (from Canva)

PROGNOSIS:

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Give it Up

Jesus holds a mirror up to our self-godly ways as enslavement to the law. We have trespassed into territory that doesn't belong to us. We have crossed over from being created beings into striving to be gods. Jesus puts this tendency to death by showing us that we cannot take even one more step in that direction. He does this to set us free of it. We are destroying ourselves and shalom with our neighbors. Jesus's blessing disabuses us of this. All we can do is give up the ruse and surrender into the arms of God that stands before us in Jesus.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Rest at Last

When God in Jesus, working through the Holy Spirit, brings us to the end of our delusional self-godly ways, it's like an ontological weight has been lifted from our shoulders. Jesus frees us from the myth that we are in control of our lives and takes the burden upon himself in his death and resurrection. The god-trespassing part of us dies and we are given the heartfelt desire to trust in our creator to provide for us. We begin to trust that God is working in our lives to bring us closer to the heart of life itself. God removes our hearts of stone that turn against our selves and each other and replaces them with beating hearts of flesh. He liberates us from our identity as slaves. In turn, we no longer need to project that slavery onto others. Jesus frees us for the world.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Living as Free Humans in Love

When the desire to control our lives and others is taken away, we are given our wholeness/righteousness back. Whole creatures can only do one thing... Love! We fall back in love with our lives and with those in it. We fall in love with the night sky, the sunrise, and the created world we inhabit. We invite the servant to the table with us and have the best meal ever. We live with grateful hearts. Our past life, which was seen as a burden to mitigate, has been taken away. A new life has been given to us as a gift. We awaken that with Jesus at the helm, it is all a gift.