

# 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.

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# **Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A**

## **PREPARE FOR DELAY**

**Matthew 25:1-13**

**Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Analysis by Bruce K Modahl**



1“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”



*From Canva*

*"Jesus is the one who joins fools in the darkness, on the wrong side of locked doors."*

## **Diagnosis: Until Kingdom Come**

### ***Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): No Excuses***

In the prior chapter Jesus interrupted his disciples' reverie over the grandeur of the temple. He told them soon and very soon not one stone in the temple will be left upon another. He told them about the end of the age, persecutions to come, and the coming of the Son of Man. The disciples wanted to know when this

was going to happen. Jesus told them, “No one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Jesus then told his disciples three parables to help them learn how to wait. We have the second of the three in this day’s Gospel reading. It is easy to find fault with the story. Jesus says the moral of the story is to keep awake. But all ten bridesmaids fell asleep. The five who ran out of oil were so excited to be in the wedding that they ran out on a midnight shopping trip. They had to wake some shop owners to sell them oil. And then they hustled back to the wedding venue. The problem is they ran out of oil. Facts are facts and all excuses aside; they were not properly prepared.

***Step 2: Advance Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Detached from the Promise***

They were not prepared for delay. The gospel choir sings, “Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king.” We’ve been praying, “Come, Lord Jesus” up to three times a day, every day of our lives. We beseech God again and again, “Thy kingdom come.” And we are still waiting. The fact is we live each day detached from God’s promise. Jesus came proclaiming, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” But for us, “kingdom come” is another way of saying “never.”

***Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Day of Reckoning***

The five bridesmaids restocked their oil supply and ran to the door of the wedding festivities. They found the door locked. The master of the banquet peered out at them and said, “I do not know you.” The bridesmaids were locked out of the party and stranded in the darkness.



From Canva

## **Prognosis: The End is Where We Start From (T.S. Eliot)**

### ***Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Hope in the Bridegroom***

In the Lutheran Book of Worship prayer of day, we say, “Lord, when the day of wrath comes, we have no hope except in your grace.” In the Dies Irae from the Requiem, is this verse,

“Remember, faithful Jesus, because I am the cause of your journey: do not lose me on that day. Thou hast sat down as one wearied seeking me, thou hast redeemed me having suffered the Cross: so much labor, let it not be lost.”

It will not be lost.

Jesus is the one who joins fools in the darkness, on the wrong side of locked doors. Now, when God the Father, the Lord of the parable, looks out, he says to the foolish bridesmaids, “I don’t know you.” Then God spots the Son standing in the midst of the fools. “But I do know you,” he says. “How did you get out there?” Jesus shows them his hands and side. What great acts of love and mercy for the locked out. “Come in my boy,” God the Father says. “They’re with me,” Jesus replies as he gives a nod toward the foolish bridesmaids. “You come too,” says God the Father.

### ***Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Gifts from God’s Future***

Our hope in Christ comes to life in the seam between what is and what will be. In this seam the Holy Spirit works faith in us and nurtures it. The Spirit does so by baptism, the Lord’s Supper, evangelical preaching, and the conversation and consolation of the people of God. These are gifts to us from the future God has prepared. God’s spirit works through these to empower us to live from the future God is even now bringing upon us.

### ***Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Ministry of Reconciliation***

For this section I’m taking my cue from Richard Lischer’s book *The End of Words*. Lischer’s book is about preaching. The end he has in mind is the ending God has constructed for the consummation of history. Resurrection from the dead is the

promise of the kingdom of God. This becomes the starting point for preaching as it was for Jesus in his inaugural sermon. We hear descriptions of God's new creation from Isaiah, Micah, and Revelation. Our starting point is a step beyond death's boundary. If this is the place from which we preach, it is also the place from which we live. Lischer asserts that in our preaching we speak into existence a new reality. If so, then let us, by all means, take up residence in this new reality, saintly sinners that we are. Where Lischer finds the animating principle for preaching is also the place we find the animating principle for living. Lischer finds it in what he calls the thesis sentence of the New Testament, 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation."

God reconciles us to himself. God in Christ reconciles us to one another. Through Christ, human beings are reconciled with themselves. All of our good works flow, as a matter of course, from the work of reconciliation God in Christ has entrusted to us.

There is nothing easy about the work of reconciliation. The cross before us tells us that.