

First Sunday of Advent, Gospel, Year B

THE PROMISING WATCH

Mark 13:24-37

First Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Michael Hoy

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.”

DIAGNOSIS: Sleep-Watching

Step One: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Watching the Stars Fall

What are you watching? If it's the news of our day, then you cannot help but see the falling of stars (at least of the political, media, or Hollywood variety). Maybe also a prelude to or commentary on our own fall from grace. Falling stars are part of the triad of darkness (with darkened sun and un-lit moon) that begins our gospel, shaking the very foundations of heaven. What shakes out from all this darkness we will soon see. But for now, there is only the pitch black of what has become our world.

Step Two: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Watching in Fear

Such watching in the dark is done in fear. "Asleep" is another word this gospel uses to describe what we often do in the darkness—close our eyes to it all, and perhaps it will all go away. But such foolishness does not change our lives in the midst of these things or the very dark chaos that surrounds us.

Step Three: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Watching the End
Eventually, these sleepy eyelids can only see what is still before our eyes—the end of all things that have come from the very darkness of our world. Even if we are looking for an escape, we will not find it. And the advent of God as the One who finds us here and critiques us in the darkness is only the final truth of our own end.

PROGNOSIS: Watching Wide-Awake

Step Four: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Watching the Beginning

But, indeed, what shakes out from heaven for our good is the promising Son of Man who comes on the clouds "with great power and glory" (v. 26). This One we know. We've seen him before as the One who stands with us in the midst of crisis and critique,

even giving his own life on the cross for our own. That spells a different end for us.

Step Five: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Watching in Faith

Through his life and death, we see a different ending to this picture. Trusting in his word of promise which “will never pass away,” we keep our eyelids open—“awake” to what future God has in mind for us; awake to see it all and live through it all to God’s ultimate solution. It is the coming of what is green and promising, at the very gates, at the door knocking with love’s presence!

Step Six: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Watching the Rising Stars

And in this One’s love, he will give his angels of mercy the charge of gathering all from the darkness and sparing all the final cost that would have been the deserved end. You and I may well be among such angels of mercy to reach out for other fearful ones caught in the web of critical darkness. We all get to live in the fullness of Christ’s promise, claiming his righteousness as our own as he himself offers, and rising with him who is the rising Star of life and light. That’s where our watch is upon the tower of grace. How does the spiritual go? “Looking to my God’s right hand, when the stars begin to fall.”
O Lord, what a morning!