

First Sunday of Advent

THE COUNTDOWN

Mark 13:24-37

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

24But 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 all 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: Counting Down to the End

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Clock Is Ticking*

The clock is ticking. Deadlines loom. Change lies ahead. No one is sure what tomorrow will bring. One thing is certain. It makes us nervous.

Lying in bed we don't want to face the problems at work. We fear the coming “wake-up” call because then we will have to face a day we wish would go away. The instability of a world unwilling to face the coming economic crisis posed by mounting debt unnerves us. The growing gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” threatens to ignite an explosion of social unrest. The diagnosis we did not want to hear from our doctor scares us. Family and marital problems, ignored for years, confront us. The secrets we have kept hidden threaten to be exposed. Even the coming “holidays” and their relentless expectations are more a burden than a joy. It seems as if our lives are falling apart. “The end of the world” looms. We fear that all will soon “come home to roost.”

It is to such days and times that Jesus speaks in today's Gospel. Jesus uses the language and imagery of traditional Jewish apocalyptic and makes a startling claim. His life and ministry are not only signs that the End is near. They are the final judgment of the world.

The season of Advent calls us to the future. It focuses on the “coming of Christ.” The clock is ticking. The fig tree has sprouted its tender branches. Summer is drawing near. The

countdown has begun. Is that future to be fled or embraced?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Pressing the Snooze Alarm*

The alarm sounds but we do not want to deal with it. Instead, we press the snooze alarm. Fearful of what lies ahead, we do not want to get out of bed. Perhaps some more sleep will make it all go away. Maybe we can return to the painless pleasure of our dreams.

The problem is that no dreamy escape or trust in persons, things, or institutions can hold off the fear that we are in trouble. They all eventually disappoint us. They all offer no reliable assurance that we will be able to endure what tomorrow brings. So, we decide to stay in bed. Maybe it will all go away. The problem is that it won't. Jesus' haunting words of warning will not let us rest. The alarm keeps sounding. We keep pressing the snooze button. We cannot go back to sleep, but we will not get up either.

Like those who first heard Jesus in today's Gospel, we ignore his call. We prefer our slumber. We would rather trust the anesthetizing promises of the false gods that clutter our world and clamor for our attention. We will not trust him and the God we meet in him. Like fools, we keep pressing the snooze alarm seeking to return to a sleep that is no longer possible.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Waking Up Too Late!*

Finally, we can no longer ignore the inevitable. We cannot avoid the day that is upon us. We cannot put off the future forever. It is time to silence the snooze alarm and get out of bed. We stare at the clock. What time is it? Oops! A shocking panic sends our heart throbbing and our body scrambling. It is already too late! We have overslept. We are in trouble! The Boss will not be happy.

The consequences of our procrastination, denial and faithlessness are huge. Jesus' warnings are not frivolous. His claims are decisive. His message is of eternal significance. Our refusal to respond on time is deadly and damning.

PROGNOSIS: Counting Down from the End

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Resetting the Clock*

At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus announces, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (1:15).

However, it looks as though it is too late. The time has come and gone. All have overslept. The alarm has sounded. The righteous of Jesus' day refused to believe it could happen to them. They insisted on pressing the snooze alarm believing that they could still sleep-in. The un-righteous, the outcast crowds (the ochloi of Mark's Gospel), thought that it was too late. They were sure that their fate had been sealed. They had no future.

In Jesus' first coming he dares to announce that he can "reset the clock." He offers a future to all those who have slept-in that they need not fear. Jesus dares to pre-empt its deadly judgment by giving the outcast a future they thought they had lost. Even more, he claims that his pre-emption has divine authorization. Jesus' first coming begins this new sacred time in what he calls the kingdom of God. Throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus lives, acts and behaves as if that new time has arrived in him. It climaxes in his death on the cross. His death calls into question his daring attempt to pre-empt God's final judgment. However, when God raises Jesus from the dead, God vindicates Jesus' claim and mission. The clock has been re-set.

Therefore, at his second coming when Jesus "comes again to judge

the living and the dead," he re-sets the clock and grants to all who call on his name a blessed fate and future.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The Charming Alarm*

We meet the third coming of Jesus in the present. Now, when the alarm sounds and wakes us up, it sounds very different. Instead of an ominous threat, it is a charming reminder that a new time is upon us. We now live in new sacred time held in Jesus' loving hands. We can face the dangers of life and the uncertainties of tomorrow with the confidence and peace that only Jesus gives.

These three comings are at the center of the season of Advent. The Sundays of Advent count down to the celebration of Jesus' first coming as the babe of Bethlehem. There he became "one of us" in order to re-set the clock. Resurrected and ascended to the future, he holds a new future in his hands for us. We now count down time FROM this gracious future back TO a present no longer haunted by the sins of the past.

Therefore, we can be sure that, when the alarm sounds for the last time and Jesus returns to judge all at his second coming, it will not be too late. At that second coming Jesus promises to forgive our faithless sleeping-in of the past.

Therefore, we have the eyes of faith to see Jesus present among us NOW. There we receive his third coming through the Word and Sacrament ministry of the church. There we receive his continual assurance that the clock has been re-set and our sins have been forgiven.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Always on Time*

Living in this new time, we get to tell our neighbors that they no longer need to covet the snooze alarm and go back to sleep. They, like we, can "keep awake." We rise, face a new world and are confident that we will always be on time. When the alarm

sounds the countdown begins, we no longer need bury our heads in the pillow. We are free to give ourselves away to a world in the grips of its deadly past. We can tell a fearful and sleepy world, Jesus has re-set the clock. He has changed the countdown. Wake up! A new world beckons us. The Kingdom has come near. We are not too late. Because we are on Christ's time, we will always be on time.