The Grace of Impermanence

Mark 13: 24-37

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Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
December 3, 2017

Many, if not most, of us, I suspect, do not need to be told to “keep awake” during Advent. Our problem is not that we sleep too much. Rather, we are quite accustomed to being sleep deprived, and despite our chronic sleep deprivation, we function quite highly. Nobody could accuse us of being asleep when we are overscheduled, bustling and hustling all day and every day. Families with children in the full swing of school, sports practices, choir rehearsals, and youth group don’t need to be told to “keep awake,” when they are already revved up, over-caffeinated, and out the door. In our household, we are even now negotiating whether this afternoon my daughter will participate in an interfaith program at a Philadelphia mosque, take part in the Advent Workshop here, or attend a friend’s birthday party. If no time is wasted in the to and from, perhaps she’ll be able to do 1 ½ of these things. These days, being awake and in overdrive has become quite ordinary.

The Advent season is supposed to jolt us out of this ordinary sense of time. According to our liturgical calendar, Advent marks the end of ordinary time. By putting us in an in-between time of anticipating, of waiting for, the coming of Christ, Advent positions us to stretch out time. By assigning to the start of Advent scripture lessons that draw on biblical end-time imagery, in which by day the sun will darken and at night the stars will fall from the sky, it is clear that in Advent we are supposed to undergo a radical change in our orientation toward time.

In a book entitled *Time*, cultural commentator and memoirist Eva Hoffman writes about the radical reorientation toward time that she underwent in emigrating. Emigrating as a child across an ocean, she found that “the past was all of a sudden on the other side of a great divide, preserved in memory but severed from the present. The future was so obscure and veiled as to have no existence”. Time, in any chronological, linear sense, seemed to have stopped its flow and instead took on more “jagged” rhythms. It is likely not unusual for those whose life narratives are so radically interrupted by geographical and cultural migration to experience such radical reorientations toward time.

Living in America, studying and working in American institutions, Eva Hoffman began to become aware of the constructions of time prevailing in the United States. She writes,

> “It was not only that time moved faster in America, it pressed onward in more stressful ways. People worked much harder, of course; but also, it seemed to me, more anxiously. . . . Even if not everyone used every minute of their working day to be optimally productive – so I noted during my tenure in some major American workplaces – everyone suffered from the stress of not doing enough, or the possibility of doing more, or at least feeling good and guilty about it”

I think we can all relate to some extent to these observations. Our ordinary sense of time is often driven by goals and destinations and measured in terms of productivity. Might something be lost in this orientation? After observing and participating in this very American orientation toward time, Eva Hoffman began to raise this question and increasingly she came to conclude that by always rushing toward a goal or destination, by always striving to be productive, we may miss out on the experience of savoring an experience. We may miss out on its meaning, its auspiciousness, its horizons, possibility and promise.

Seminary professor Rodger Nishioka tells a story from his childhood that makes this point. “From a very young age,” he writes, “I have known that the point of any hike was to get to the destination.

Whenever we went hiking, I, the second-born among four boys, competed with my brothers to see who could take the lead and hold it. Dad would keep up with us to be sure we followed the trail and did not get hurt. We hiked through forest lands in the Pacific Northwest, where we grew up. We scrambled up trails making all kinds of noise, trying to hold each other back and chiding our younger brothers for not keeping up with us. When we got to the end of the trail, we would collapse and wait. . . and we would wait. . . and wait.

It was a rule that we could not eat our snacks or lunch until Mom joined us. The problem was that Mom was so slow. We would end up complaining to Dad about having to wait, but we knew the rule. We always ate together as a family. Eventually, to our relief, Mom would show up. She had made her way steadily up the trail.

While eating, . . . at some point, Mom would look at us and ask, "Did you boys see the marmot?" "No. There was a marmot? Where?" we would ask, perplexed. "Along the trail," Mom would say. We would be quiet, thinking about how cool it would be to see a marmot. Then Mom would speak again. "Did you boys see the family of beavers and their house?" "Beavers!?" we would exclaim. "Where?" "In the middle of the lake we passed a couple of miles into the hike. They were so busy. I enjoyed sitting and watching them," Mom would reply. "What lake? There was a lake?" we would ask. "You missed the whole lake?" Mom would ask incredulously. Then she would smile and say, "Perhaps we could stop by the lake on the way back down and see if the beavers are still working" .

We know that we don't have to be in an actual race to be at risk of failing to pay attention to everything except the destination. Most of us just need to live as we ordinarily do, trying to be productive, effective, goal-oriented.

In the gospel of Mark, we find Jesus presenting an alternative to our destination-driven ordinary sense of time. Jesus tells us that we are to watch and wait for his coming, but that no one except God knows the exact time of his coming. Even Jesus himself doesn't know the day or the hour.

Somehow, despite Jesus' insistence that it is not for us to know when the end will be, the end time is precisely what has captured the attention and imagination of many. You may remember Harold Camping, the man in charge of Family Radio, who had announced that on May 21, 2011 the world would end. As we know, May 21st came and went without incident. So he revised his prediction to October 21st instead. It was not surprising that Mr. Camping was wrong, because he had been wrong before: three times in 1994 and once in 1995.

Mr. Camping was in good company. Bishop Clement of Rome predicted it would happen around the year 90. Hilary of Poitiers thought it would happen at the end of the year in 365. Martin of Tours tried to correct that prediction to sometime before the year 400. Upon seeing an eclipse in the year 968, the German emperor Otis III thought the end was near. During and after the Y1K crisis, Christian nations justified the Crusades with their predictions of the second coming of Christ. The Shakers predicted 1792. Charles Wesley preferred 1794. The Jehovah's Witnesses predicted the close of the age to take place in 1914, 1915, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1941, 1975, and 1994 (See Casey Thompson, *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, 428).

There is something called the Rapture Ready Index. Perhaps because of the long history of false predictions, the Rapture Ready Index does not purport to predict exactly when the rapture will happen. Instead, it is designed to measure the kind of activity that could act as a precursor to the rapture. Its administrators liken it to "the Dow Jones Industrial Average of end time activity" (raptureready.com). According to the index, "the higher the number, the faster we're moving towards the occurrence of pre-tribulation rapture" (raptureready.com).

All of this preoccupation with the time and the portents of Christ's coming distracts us, I think, from the point of the biblical imagery upon which Jesus draws when he speaks about his coming. In *Mark*, Jesus draws on the same imagery used by the prophet Isaiah, when Isaiah laments that the God who had rescued

Israel by mighty and awesome acts is now nowhere to be seen. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, that you would do those things that you did in the past, that you would bring fire and earthquake and make our enemies tremble, that you would be a clear and present force as you were when you rescued your people from slavery and led them out of Egypt!" Isaiah's lamentation is an expression of Israel's existential wrestling during their exile as they learn to relate to a God who, while remaining close to them, hides from them.

It is an existential predicament with which the people of God have always wrestled: the ancient Israelites during the time of exile, the followers of Christ after his crucifixion and death, the Jews in the time of the Holocaust, African American slaves who sang, "My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall!" How do we relate to God who has come to be with us and yet is distant from us?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a concentration camp in 1944, dared to draw the conclusion: "God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. . . . Before God and with God we live without God" (Scott Bader-Saye, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, p. 4). He went on to say that "God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us".

No matter how often we make the journey through Advent and then Holy Week, this never ceases to astound me. I am always astounded on Christmas Eve to discover a vulnerable infant in the manger who is God and on Good Friday to behold a vulnerable man hung on the cross who is God. The God who lets himself come into the world as a vulnerable infant also lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross.

Drawing on the language of Israel's lament, Jesus positioned his followers to live in this time of waiting for his return – to live in relationship to God who has come to be with us and yet will be absent from us.

Some of the richest meditations on this radical sense of time have always been found in art. This is especially true of music, which, of all the arts, works most directly with time and is the most fleeting of all artistic forms. I remember reading Daniel Barenboim on how musicians prepare for silence. "One way of preparing for silence," he wrote, "is to create a tremendous amount of tension preceding it, so that the silence arrives only after the absolute height of intensity and volume has been reached. Another way of approaching silence entails a gradual diminution of sound, letting the music become so soft that the next possible step can only be silence. Silence, in other words, can be louder than the maximum and softer than the minimum. . . .In the world of sound, even death is not necessarily final".

If we let it, Advent can radically reorient our sense of time. If we let it, Advent can jolt us out of our ordinary time into a kind of temporality that lets God come in order to let God go and that lets God go in order to let God come.