

“One Small Candle”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 29, 2020 – First Sunday of Advent
Psalm 80:1-7- 17-19; Mark 13:24-37

Happy New Year! Or Happy New Liturgical Year anyway! We have moved into the new year with the beginning of this season of Advent, and throughout this year, beginning with this Sunday’s scripture lesson, we will be working through the Gospel according to Mark, and so it would be good to begin this new journey through the book by taking a brief look at the book’s background.

The gospel is named Mark, but nowhere in the gospel itself is the author identified. In this way, it is like our other three canonical gospels. All of the surviving manuscripts of the book that exist, however, call the book the Gospel according to Mark, and documents of the early second century identify Mark, an interpreter of Jesus’ disciple Simon Peter, as the author of the work, and that this Mark reported accurately, but with his own literary framework, what Peter reported to him about the life and teaching of Jesus. It is hard to be sure that this is the case, but some very good evidence points to it being so, and many modern scholars consider this to be a reliable tradition.

It is the oldest of our gospels, likely written sometime during or shortly after the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70 CE, and the material in Mark ends up being used in the newer gospel according to Matthew, that we just went through, as well as the gospel of Luke, that we will go through next year.

Perhaps today’s reading from Mark sounded familiar to you. It should have as it served as some of the source material for the apocalyptic

readings from Matthew that we've read over the course of the last three Sundays.

Today's reading is part of what is known as the "Little Apocalypse" of Mark, and like the recently read material from Matthew, it employs symbolic, apocalyptic language to describe the coming of a day of judgment when Christ will return to reign with justice. It is part of a discourse that Jesus offered from atop the Mount of Olives, just before the last week of his earthly life, in which Jesus envisions the destruction of nearby Jerusalem and its Temple, which Rome accomplished in 70 CE. Jesus also envisions his own return to Jerusalem from the clouds, when he would gather the children of Israel, who since the time of the Babylonian exile centuries before had been scattered over the face of the whole earth, and begin a new era when all will enjoy true justice and peace.

As I've mentioned in recent Sundays, the apocalyptic literature that we find in the Bible, from Daniel to Revelation to the "Little Apocalypse" of Mark, are all to be understood as symbolic messages offered to encourage those who heard or read these words to take hope that whatever injustice and oppression they were experiencing at the time by human powers would soon end, that God would overturn those oppressive powers and bring peace and prosperity. In the day of Isaiah, the people hoped for God to overturn the power of Babylon. In the time of the writing of Daniel, it was the Empire of Greece that was the oppressor. And during the lives of Jesus and his first followers, Rome and their puppet kings, the Herods, were the brutal, unjust rulers of the people. The Bible's apocalyptic literature was written to these beleaguered peoples to remind them that no matter the darkness they were experiencing at the hands of these human empires, no matter how hopeless their situation seemed, God is greater than all earthly powers and *will* displace the world's darkness with perfect light.

This message, that God will shine light in the dark places, is the message we remember each Advent season. And like those previous generations who lived in dark times when all seemed bleak and hopeless, we long for God's light to come to us and our world this season. We pray with the psalmist, "O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved!"

Like the generations of Jesus followers who have lived before us, we still wait for Christ's return, when all will be light. When this will be, we do not know. For now, we can see the light of Christ shining in the darkness, and we can see it growing brighter in our hearts and in the world. Our job is to take hope in this and to be part of God's plan to grow the light of Christ throughout the earth. And so we stay awake, vigilant, with our lamps trimmed and burning, paying attention to what God has done and showing others the bright light of Christ.

Quoting Methodist minister W.L. Watkinson, Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness."¹ There is much darkness in our world as there was in the world of Jesus as there was in the world of Israel before Christ. Cursing the darkness, that is merely complaining about it or lamenting it, doesn't do much good. It didn't in ancient times, and it won't in our time. What does do good is to engage in the work of candle lighting. Each day, we can light one small candle and displace the darkness in our own lives. Day by day, week by week, by the grace of God's Spirit, the light can grow within us and can be used by God to make the world around us brighter.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail" these words: "The early Christians rejoiced when they

¹ W.L. Watkinson, "The Invincible Strategy," 1907
(https://archive.org/stream/supremeconquest01watkggoog/supremeconquest01watkggoog_djvu.txt).

were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”² Church, we are still called to be a thermostat, actively changing the temperature of the world around us, rather than being a thermometer, merely reflecting the current temperature of the world. In a cold, darkened world, we are called neither to reflect the chilly darkness nor to merely complain about it; rather, we are called to displace the cold darkness with the brightness and warmth of Christ’s light shining through us.

So shine! Lift up the lowly. Be concerned for the powerless, and use your power to empower others.

Shine! When you see someone’s voice being taken from them, speak up and speak out on their behalf.

Shine! Use your financial resources to be a blessing. I read wonderful article yesterday in the *New York Times* celebrating the good work of the United Church of Christ and other Christian denominations in funding the forgiveness of medical debts for thousands of people in our country that had been crushed by financial burdens that they unable to carry on their own. You should know that whenever you give to your church, a portion your giving supports this work of forgiving debts as well as many other life-giving efforts of our denomination. Your gifts to the church shine light in the world.

So shine with your work, shine with your word, shine with your wallet.

² M.L. King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 1963 (<https://billofrightsinstitute.org/educate/educator-resources/lessons-plans/letter-from-birmingham-jail/>).

This Advent, may the light of Christ shine brightly among us, and may your song be: “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine!”