

How God Gives Directions

Mark 13: 28-37

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Have you ever regretted asking someone for directions? Go straight, they explain, then turn left at the light. And take a right at thus and such landmark - you can't miss it! - and keep going until you see the sign.... The directions make perfect sense to the person who is giving them, but just hearing these unfamiliar details explained soon lose confidence that you'll be able to remember them accurately, much less actually follow them. But you pretend to understand what this guy is explaining because you've already reached the conclusion that you'll just find your own way because it's not worth asking this person to explain it again. That's sort of how Jesus is making me feel today.

He's explaining what to expect of the coming messiah. But his directions don't make sense to someone who has never been there before. Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent, literally the first day in a new year on the Christian calendar. We are standing at the beginning but oddly today Jesus is talking about the end. When the Messiah comes, these are the signs associated with his arrival. This is what you will see. This is what you will feel. This is how you will know that you've come to the right place and the moment has arrived. "The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in heaven will be shaken." What? Come again? I want to ask for more detail, for more exact instructions....but I didn't get it the first time and I'm not confident that I can pick it up with another recitation.

There's another mystery in this passage concerning time. Here we are standing on the first Sunday of Advent, literally the beginning of a new year in the Christian tradition - and Jesus is talking about the end. How odd. Instructions to receive the Messiah - instructions to participate in the fulfillment of this promise on the very first day. I remember when I was learning to drive I kept a big road atlas in the back seat of the car. Of course this sounds ridiculous today because we have phones that tell us how to get around. But back in those days to get to an unfamiliar destination I would literally open the atlas and trace the highways with my fingers, then I would write a carefully detailed list of the turns I would need to make and the signs I would need to look for. I remember this used to make me a very anxious driver because if I didn't have a good sense of the distance between junctions I would worry obsessively about the possibility that I had already missed a turn. Should I stop and check the map again? Perhaps a sign was missing. Perhaps I wasn't paying adequate attention. So in the instructions I would make for myself, I would include distances and I would set my odometer. After two hundred miles, say, start looking for Interstate 81. Most of the time I got where I was going without much trouble. But there was that one late night drive to Chattanooga when I ended up in Nashville.

So maybe there is something to the association Jesus seems to be making here between following directions and keeping track of time. He gives these directions in the beginning, directions all the way to the end so that we will not grow drowsy with the passage of time. This is what to look for, Jesus says. This is what you will see. This is how you will know you have arrived.

Here we are on the First Sunday of Advent. It's the Thirty-Eighth Sunday of Coronatide. We're at the beginning of the year. In the middle of a pandemic. And Jesus is talking about the details of the end. What a confounding sense of time, don't you think?

And we just want it to be over. They say we're in such an unenviable position with the virus these days because of the "fatigue" of social isolation. Everyone is tired. A lot of people have experienced some loss this year. And if you did Thanksgiving right last week it probably felt pretty

lonely. We've received news of promising vaccine prospects, but they won't be delivered until the far side of the long winter we're facing. So with all these discouraging circumstances it's easy to understand how some may be letting their vigilance slip these days.

On the other hand, if you've got your eyes open - things out there are getting pretty interesting. Jesus speaks of signs potent with "great power and glory," stars falling from heaven and the very foundations of the earth shaking. Yes, we've seen some of that this year, haven't we? A dramatic election. A new government forming. Racial violence and social action. Our lives have been turned upside down. Isaiah speaks in similar language about the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah says the nations will tremble. Isaiah says that the heavens will veritably open. Isaiah says that all the people of the world will be humbled. Yes...we've seen some of these things this year.

Say more, God. God what are you trying to tell us? What if Jesus doesn't just give us directions in advance, like whoever is mansplaining the route to Chattanooga. What if God is actually speaking to us, in the moment. Announcing new directions turn by turn. That is the Messianic Tradition of ISAiah and Jesus that we belong to. "O that you would open the heavens and come down." Listen to what Isaiah says. "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect and came down." We hear you, Isaiah says. We see you, Isaiah says. God coming into our life. That is the incarnation, that is what we are waiting for in Advent.

What if we did take seriously the importance of the signs that we do have? What if we did stay awake and worry ourselves a bit about how to interpret what we see? All I'm saying is that you can't blame the person who gave you these directions when you fall asleep at the wheel.

Stay awake.

Keep watch.

Read the signs.

Trust yourself to notice them.

Assume that these signs have meaning.

Don't miss the signals. Read the signs of the times. God is with us.

Amen.