

You Are Invited to Live

Mark 13: 24-31

Nasrudin was at a teahouse with his cronies. When the discussion turned to the question of life after death, he became uncharacteristically quiet. One friend finally cornered him with the question, "Is there life after death or not?" At last Nasrudin replied, "Is there life before death? That is the real question." (from *Invitations* by Francis Dewar)

The question we face today is this: are we living or just sleepwalking through life? Jesus' invitation is to live life before death, to live fully, with meaning, with hope, and with joy. You are invited to live and "be continually sensitive to the unfolding of God's plan in our lives: to give free and open assent to the destiny God's love is shaping for us." (John Main, *The Present Christ*) You are invited to let go *what is deadening for you* and to do *what brings you to life*.

This time of year, you probably receive lots of invitations to holiday parties, open houses, and other Christmas gatherings. Invitations are ways that people articulate a sense of anticipation, excitement, and possibility. They are a way of saying, "I hope you'll join me in a gathering of friends, a time of joy and living well, and of participating in loving community. In a way, Jesus is God's invitation to us, to all people, and to all creation to a banquet, a party, a gathering of friends, and a time of joy. Jesus often used the image of a party for the Kingdom of Heaven. The Bible describes life in God as a banquet, an open house, a gathering of friends. All are included here and now and eternally.

The season of Advent begins today. We are invited to begin a new journey to Bethlehem. Advent is the end of darkness and the dawn of light. It is the end of hopelessness and the beginning of divine presence. It is the end of death and the birth of God. Today's theme is hope, yet today's scripture lesson is about the end of the world as we know it – apocalypse. What is that all about? Let us begin our Advent journey by addressing that question.

Every significant crisis is an apocalypse, a time when life as we have known it ends. New possibility is created by the choices we make. The author of Mark's gospel wrote:
But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Mark 13: 24-25 NRSV

The world was ending for Mark's community. Life as they knew it had come to a conclusion. It was the ending of heaven and earth. The old order was passing away. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the armies of Rome in 70CE. They wondered what would be next? What new possibilities lay ahead?

Mark wrote:

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then 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. Mark 13: 26-27 NRSV

The elect were not just Jews in Palestine. They came from the ends of the earth and from the ends of heaven. The elect for Mark's readers can be thought of as a self-selected group -- all who identify themselves as God's children's. These are they who say "yes" to God's invitation to life, especially in times of great stress.

What about this *son of man* who is given authority? The book of Daniel depicts a series of empires who had dominated Israel as beasts: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Medes, and the Greeks. This was before Rome took control. Now authority and power is given to the *son of man* -- a personification of the people of Israel. By extension, this includes all people, all children of God. Mark reaffirms, even in the face of the Roman beast, that the new order will be characterized by justice and shalom. The reign of God has very different power structures contrary to the way of the world and of conventional wisdom.

Mark's final warning:

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Mark 13: 28-30 NRSV

Life in the key of God is an invitation to live differently: to wake up, watch, and pay attention -- to see what is real.

What is the connection for us today? The invitation to live is contained in the Latin phrase *Dum vivimus vivamus* -- "while we live let us live!" The life to which Jesus called us is Spirit life -- much more than physical existence, putting in time while we have breath. Existence happens to us and can be taken from us. To live is a choice we make to embrace a different set of values. We live because of a series of choices we make to engage life as journey: to follow our passion and joy. Making those choices means that the world as we know it ends. We see what has been and what we want life to be.

To choose live means we must learn to trust our deepest wants because they reflect the presence of God in our lives. We must trust in our passion and also realize the danger in living out of touch with what we want most deeply. As one writer says:

When we succeed in ignoring our wants they either find expression in destructive ways or cause us all kinds of ills and problems that make us self-centered and self-serving -- the very end we are so anxious to avoid. The outcome, however, is not usually this dramatic. Out of touch with the life-giving energy of our wants and desires, we are more apt to become flat and uninteresting people.

Imperceptibly, disintegration goes on at the very core of life. The calm and expressionless face reflects not peace at the center, but a dying going on within. For these passionless selves the words were spoken, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." (Eph. 5:14, RSV)

Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*

Eschatological imagery is a challenge to get real about life. This invitation to live is not casual. It is not coerced. It is a free choice, but with clear consequences. Crises are the

very times we are called to live, to find ourselves, and to discover what it is we are to do in the world.

How do we say “yes” to life, to God’s invitation to live? That’s what this sermon series is all about: *Coping with Crisis: Taking Charge of your Life*. Beginning today, for the next sixteen Sundays, we will be unpacking in depth how to respond to this invitation to live. An important first step is how to respond to times of crisis. How helpful it is that our world has provided an economic crisis so that we can practice. In crises, to the extent we are able to choose to live with love for others, with a sense of abundance, and with a sense of hope and saying “yes” to life, then we are responding to God’s invitation to live fully. What have you done to choose to live – to engage your life at this time?

Another way to respond, to say “yes” to God’s invitation to live, is to be open to the deep wisdom of life by being open to your own deepest questions. Advent is a journey to Bethlehem. It is a mystical expression of the life of God in the life of Jesus. Jesus’ life may raise more questions for us than answers. Jesus’ life certainly confused what the religious and political powers of his day had thought was clear. That’s why they killed him. Jesus’ life today encourages us to love the questions it raises, as the poet said:

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Letter Four, July 16, 1903,
Stephen Mitchell, trans., New York: Random House, 1987

When questions are honest and meaningful, the answers we eventually find are meaningful and life-changing.

The invitation I extend today begins with two questions. Do you want to be called back to life? What is the life path you are seeking? Today we begin a journey through Advent to Bethlehem to find life. Light for the world shines in the manger. If the path you seek is a life of true abundance -- rich in community, justice, peace, love, and hope – then journey with us to Bethlehem’s manger. Then journey beyond the manger to Calvary’s cross and beyond to the crossroads of our lives where life ends and new life begins. Come let us follow and live.