

**H.ealing O.pportunities P.resent E.veryday**  
**by Rev. Durrell Watkins, M.A., M.Div.**  
**Sunshine Cathedral, Advent 1, 2008**  
**Mark 13.24-31**

I have a story about hope. My great-aunt Gladys moved into a retirement home. Her new next door neighbor had a short term memory problem. He walked up to her one day and said, "Gladys, I can't remember how old I am." She said, "drop your pants and bend over." He did and she said, "you're 91." Pulling his pants back up the man asked, "how do you know I'm 91?" She said, "you told me yesterday." Oh, what has that got to do with hope? I hope to one day be as joyfully mischievous as my Aunt Gladys was!

It's the first Sunday of Advent and our focus for today is Hope. And to talk about hope, I want to focus on three different events.

The first event I want to bring to mind is one that I've mentioned maybe 40 times in the last two years. I mention it so frequently not because I'm obsessed with it, but because it is so central to the heart of the gospel. The event is, of course, the Fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D.

In the year 66, Jewish revolutionaries rebelled against Rome. Four years later, Rome retaliated with extreme force and destroyed the city. At about this same time, and I believe in response to these very events, a writer pens what we today call the Gospel of Mark.

Matthew and Luke would later write new gospel narratives borrowing heavily from Mark. We'll spend the better part of the next year examining just what Mark has to say about his world, but we begin today with noticing not only his anger and his grief in response to the Roman decimation of Jerusalem, but also with his refusal to give up hope.

Mark uses his memory of recent events, his understanding of Hebrew bible passages, and his own imagination of how divine justice might one day be achieved, and the sum of these variables is the passage we heard today.

Mark imagines stars falling from the sky and heavenly powers being shaken. In the ancient world, rulers were often called stars, and to imagine a "falling star" was to speak of a ruler being defeated.

Also in antiquity, rulers often were considered sons and daughters of the gods, and so these divine-humans, these sovereigns were thought to have cosmic or heavenly powers. When Mark says, "the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the sky and the powers in the heavens will be shaken," he is saying, "A battle is coming. The battle will be so fierce, the dust and smoke from the fight will block out the sky, and the Emperor will be toppled and his empire will come to an end."

True enough, the fantasy is a violent one, but it is also one that is expressing the hope of liberation. One day, those who brought so much pain to our lives will no longer be able to do so. Even couched in the angry but still cathartic imagery of apocalyptic violence, what Mark is really doing is saying, "Even during these worst of times, we absolutely must cling to hope."

That brings me to the second event I want to name today. Tomorrow is World AIDS Day. I remember in the early nineties when we were fighting for the lives of entire communities, we would do anything to generate hope. We would try alternative and complementary therapies. We'd take vitamins, get massages, wear colors that were thought to have healing vibrations, take experimental medications...anything in order to hold on to hope. We even developed clever little slogans, like "HIV means Hope Is Vital."

In 1981 we started seeing Kaposi Sarcoma and a rare strain of viral pneumonia attacking gay men in the urban, coastal cities. By 1983 we were calling the condition Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID), although we were also noticing that heterosexuals were getting it too. Not until 1987 did we have a medical therapy for it, and not until 1996 did we have combination therapies that actually could manage the disease for many people. Of course, even then, the medicines weren't universally available, nor were they without their own unpleasant side effects.

I was born in 1966 and first heard of this strange disease when I was a sophomore in high school. By my freshmen year in college we were calling the disease AIDS, and the virus thought to cause it HTLV-3. A few years later, the virus name was changed to HIV...the Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus.

It was a scary time to come of age. In 1991 I became infected with the HIV virus. And from 1994 to 1997 I was an AIDS Chaplain...during those years I conducted about 100 funerals, all for people under the age of 50. I officiated most of those funerals before I turned 30.

Friends, lovers, community leaders...we lost a generation. But what we didn't lose was HOPE. We started calling people who lived with HIV for 5 years long term survivors. And then people who made it 10 years were long term survivors. Finally we started seeing people live with it for 20 years and now more. We saw people bounce back from pneumonia, and from wasting syndrome, and we even saw people who had experienced the heart-break of losing their children, their lovers, their best friends, their heroes, start to reclaim their joy in life.

We prayed for a cure. We prayed for strength. And even when hope seemed ridiculous, we hoped anyway. And one blood draw after another, one funeral after another, one diagnosis after another, one tear after another...we continued to move forward. We gave. We fought. We marched. We protested. We voted. We spoke. We dared to form spiritual communities even when other churches dared to use God's name in vain by calling AIDS God's wrath and while still other churches closed their eyes and their hearts to the viral holocaust that was happening all around them.

We kept hope alive, and hope kept us alive...either by energizing bodies, or by keeping us alive in the memories of our loved ones after the bodies expired.

In the wake of the Fall of Jerusalem, when the world seemed to be crashing down around him, Mark summoned the implausible courage to not only have but to share hope. And that's what we did when AIDS struck. And that's what we must continue to do until AIDS has finally been cured.

The final event I need to name today is a disease that infects the soul of our planet, and that disease is Homophobia. The irrational fear and venomous hatred of same-gender loving people have caused us to write discrimination into the very constitutions that are meant to protect the liberties and equality of all people.

We are tempted to get discouraged when religion and politics are used as weapons to deny the humanity of gay and lesbian people and the sacredness of all mutual affection. But then we remember Mark writing his gospel. And we remember the lessons of AIDS. And we know that if we will not give up hope, then one day the breakthrough will come and healing will bless our world. One day, because we dared to hope even when situations looked hopeless, the sacred value of all people and the goodness of God expressing through all genuine love will be recognized and diversity will be celebrated rather than feared and despised. We will speak out. We will pray. We will celebrate the diversity of our wonderful community. We will claim our sacred value. And we will never lose hope.

The world as Mark knew it ended right before his eyes. He responded by writing a performance piece that he called Good News...a message of hope. He dared to imagine the world getting better, and he dared to believe that hope was an appropriate response even to the worst of

tragedies. Like Mark, we continue to hope. We hope for a cure for AIDS. We hope for an end to homophobia. We hope that everyone who needs the Good News we have to share will find us and learn to celebrate their sacred value.

Things may not get better all at once, but there is H.O.P.E...healing opportunities present everyday. We can give one more person her dignity back. We can give one more couple the joy of celebrating their love. We can give one more teen the information needed to keep him from contracting HIV. We can give one more person living with HIV the stories of those who have lived well with the virus, and we can give them and all people the promise of a loving community no matter what happens in life. These are healing opportunities, they are needed, and we can share them. We can be, we must be, and we will be the messengers of hope. This is the Good News. Amen.

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**Hope expresses through me now.  
The power of hope blesses me now.  
I refuse to lose hope.  
I will share hope with my world.  
And so it is! Amen.**

Our Final Word is from a prayer by O. Eugene Picket: **“For human liberty and sacred rites; for opportunities to change and grow, to affirm and choose – we give thanks this day. We pray that we may live not by our fears but by our hopes, not by our words but by our deeds.”**