



Advent 1-November 29, 2020  
Baltic and East Nidaros Parish  
Matthew 13:24-37

## “But, First”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Dear friends in Christ, Grace, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*You might think since this is the first Sunday in Advent, a season when we anticipate and prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ, the first message of this season would start at the beginning of the story of Jesus and be directed toward Bethlehem where Jesus was born. However, as is usually the case with Jesus, what you might expect is not usually what happens. Indeed, as the season of Advent prepares us for Christmas, we will get to the manger in Bethlehem. **But first** this reading from Mark encourages us to start at the end of the life of Jesus to first remind us why Jesus came from heaven to earth for you.*

*It is best that we set the stage for these verses you just heard by first hearing what happens at the beginning of this 13th Chapter of Mark. At the start of this chapter, Jesus' inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, John and Andrew came out of the temple with Jesus and as they look around they are fascinated by the large stones that were the foundations for the large buildings in Jerusalem. Jesus quickly turns their attention from these earthly buildings and destroys their fascination of what they see by saying that “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” These disciples that are often near Jesus thought they might be given some insider information when the stones will be coming down, so they ask him at least to be given a sign when these things will happen.*

*Jesus in fact does give these disciples several signs to look for such as wars, earthquakes, nations fighting with other nations, famines, but tells them that this is only the beginning of the end. Jesus calls these signs just the birth pains. The disciples might have had second thoughts about being so close to Jesus when he next told them that another sign to watch for was that they would be handed over to councils because of what they were preaching and would be beaten in synagogues. Jesus gives them still another sign of the end of time by declaring, “**But first** the gospel must be preached to all nations”.*

*Today we begin at the end of time rather than the birth of Jesus. This is to remind us how Jesus functions. Jesus never starts with raw material and does what he can to make it better. Instead, Jesus kills the old and makes new. Jesus, the second person of the trinity creates out of nothing. Jesus starts from scratch rather than working from an existing recipe started by someone else. Jesus creates new hearts after first destroying the old. This is why Jesus doesn't fear death. When he sees a cemetery, he doesn't view it as a place where life has come to an end, but a place where when he speaks, graves are opened, and new life will begin. Jesus doesn't wait for instructions before he acts, Jesus simply speaks, and new life happens.*

One of my favorite episodes of MASH includes a scene with a **“but, first”**. In this episode, a stray bomb landed in the middle of the compound and Hawkeye and Trapper John were given the task of defusing it by following each instruction given by Colonel Blake. Hawkeye and Trapper slowly approach the bomb by carrying mattresses in front of them along with the tools needed to defuse the bomb. Mysterious music is played throughout the scene. Colonel Blake, Radar, Nurse Houlihan, and Frank Burns are hiding far away from the bomb behind sandbags for protection in case something goes wrong. Colonel Blake breaks the silence with his blow horn loudly asking if they can hear him. Then he reads from a paper giving step by step instructions what they are to do to defuse the bomb. Blake commands, **“first you need a wrench”**. They find a large crescent wrench. Then he says, **“Place it gently on the nut above the locking ring.”** With the mysterious music still playing, drums adding to the tension of the scene and sweat dripping from their faces, they adjust the wrench and carefully loosen the nut. Blake continues, **“Now rotate the locking ring counterclockwise.”** Hawkeye and Trapper look at each other to decide which way is counterclockwise and successfully accomplish that step. Blake gives the next instruction, **“Now remove the tail assembly from the bomb.”** They both lift the assembly from the main part of the bomb exposing two wires. Then Blake looks at his instructions again to give the next step and says, **“Now carefully cut the wires leading to the clockwork fuse in the head.”** And with each clip of the wires the music intensifies. Then after a couple seconds of relief because the bomb has not exploded, Blake’s next words are, **“But, first, remove the fuse.”** The music stops and Blake drops the blow horn and Hawkeye and Trapper look at each other in disbelief, waiting for the bomb to explode.

I’m not sure if the disciples ever caught on to some of the **“but, first”** signs that were given to them. When Jesus told the disciples to learn from the lesson from the fig tree that you will know that summer is near because of the tender branches and leaves emerging, did they remember the fig tree that Jesus cursed outside of the temple and they watched it die is now coming to life again? When Jesus told the disciples about the slaves who were put in charge with their work of being doorkeepers, did they recall when Jesus had first given them the keys to the door to the kingdom of heaven that he was speaking about them as doorkeepers? When Jesus told the disciples to keep awake, did they recall Jesus saying this when they all fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane? And I wonder what the look might have been on Peter’s face when the cock crowed three times when he denied knowing Jesus, when Jesus first had told him that you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at **cockcrow**? And as Jesus’ disciples watched the sky darken and the veil of the temple torn in two as the earth shook when Jesus died on the cross, did they remember what Jesus first had told him that the son of man would come in power and then send out his angels to gather his elect from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven? None of these signs gave the disciples faith. It was not until Easter morning when the resurrected Jesus spoke to them that they believed.

Signs can be helpful in pointing us in the right direction to destinations, but they are not the destination. Signs are never certain. Even after keeping alert to all the signs, Jesus declares that only his Father knows when he will return. Signs leave us like Hawkeye and Trapper after cutting the wires to the clockwork, and then hearing a **“but first”** which leaves us wondering what will happen next.

You and I no longer wonder what will happen since we begin the season of Advent at the end of the story of Jesus. There are no **“but firsts”** for you and I to do. Jesus has done everything for us. In the waters of baptism, his promise to claim you as his own happens with his word alone. There are no **“but firsts”** attached. When

*Jesus says all of your sins are forgiven in his name, he doesn't add a conditional "but first" to see how sorry you really were for sinning. When Jesus calls the names of those you lie in rest in cemeteries to rise to new life, there is no, "**but first**" leaving something for those who have died in Christ to do. When Jesus speaks a promise, there are no conditions.*

*The signs that Jesus spoke to his disciples about as they left the temple weren't as much about the end of time as they were about when he would take his last breath on the cross. As we begin this season of Advent, we begin at the end of Jesus' life knowing why Jesus was born. Jesus was born, lived, was crucified, and rose again for you. After heaven and earth pass away, these words will not pass away. Amen.*