

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NRSV)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. [15] In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. [16] In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Luke 21:25-36 (NRSV)

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. [26] People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. [27] Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. [28] Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

[29] Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; [30] as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. [31] So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. [32] Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. [33] Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

[34] "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, [35] like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. [36] Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

Several years ago I did a wedding for the son of a member. He was, to put it mildly, quite a character. During the rehearsal we did the usual things, and I said, "At this point in the ceremony the bride and groom will enter. Do you know what song you want us to play as you come down the isle?"

And the groom answered, “I don’t know. How about, ‘it’s the end of the world as we know it?’” If looks could have killed, that groom would have been dead on the spot from the intense stare he received from his bride at that point. I cleared my throat and said something about the organist not knowing that one and quickly moved on to the next part of the service.

It may have been a bad joke, but the groom had it right you know. That wedding did mark the end of the world as he knew it, for him and his bride to be and their family. When you take a momentous step like that, your whole world does change. When you get married, it really is the end of the world as you know it. I’m not so sure that I would use such apocalyptic terms to describe it, but it is true.

When you think about it, there are many events that can change our life forever that can end the world as we know it. I saw a bumper sticker the other day that said, “Learn to appreciate wild life. Have children!” The birth of a child changes everything. It’s the end of the world as you know it.

When a loved one dies, it’s the end of the world as you know it. Your whole life takes on a new hue when the most important person in your life is gone.

When you move to a new place or begin a new job, it is sometimes the end of the world as you know it. Everything changes, and that can make for a very difficult adjustment.

NATIONAL UPHEAVAL

But, these personal changes pale in comparison to national upheavals that can sometimes take place. Some of you remember the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entrance of this country into World War II. Countless lives were changed forever by that one act.

During times like that anxiety about the future can cause people to cast their mind to more apocalyptic themes in earnest. Is this the end of the world as we know it?

After the attacks of 911 many people had the same kinds of thoughts.

And when Luke wrote his gospel, it was also during a time of terrible national tragedy. And it caused people to think in apocalyptic terms. Jerusalem and the temple had been totally destroyed by the Romans. Those who made it out alive were asking, “Is this the end of the world as we know it?”

Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple. And as Luke arranged all the oral accounts of Jesus’ life into an orderly history, and one of the last chapters dealt with this very topic.

When will the end of time come? What will be the signs of the end? Will it be when the temple falls? Are we living in the last days today? Is this the end of the world as we know it?

One commentator wrote that in apocalyptic literature “what is going on is mixed with what is really going on.” Current history is set in the larger context of God’s purpose for the world.

THE REAL END OF THE WORLD

So was it the end of the world when the temple was destroyed in Jerusalem and many died a horrible death? Jesus said no. It wasn’t the end of the world. That cataclysmic event was yet to come.

That day would be greater than any personal or even national tragedy. That day would be a time when the whole creation would groan in anticipation.

Jesus in our passage for today tells us that there will be “signs in the sun, the moon and the stars.” On the earth there will be “distress among nations confused by the roaring of the seas.” “The heavens will be shaken” and people will “faint from fear and foreboding.”

Several years ago I had a church member who was well over a hundred years old. She remembered when Haley’s Comet first appeared. It was very close, and some people didn’t know what it was. She said that those people “got religion” very fast, dropping to their knees and praying for forgiveness and deliverance.

Whenever I think of the end of the world, I think of her description. I think of people dropping to their knees on the spot in the face of overwhelming cosmic signs.

And while the entire world is seemingly coming apart at the seams, then you will see the “Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory.”

Jesus said, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

I don't think that will be a problem for us to raise our heads if we are around at that time.

When the universe starts coming apart at the seams and Jesus comes in a cloud of glory, all of us will look up and pray for redemption.

LOOKING ABOUT INSTEAD OF UP?

It is during the living of these days that we sometimes have trouble in keeping our minds on “higher things.” Instead of looking up we look about. We become anxious about the day to day cares of life. We become weighed down by our fears. We become captive to the demons of our past.

Jesus put it this way. He said, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.”

That word “dissipation” is not a word that we use very often. It means a careless, indulgent lifestyle. Some might say that this is the very lifestyle that characterizes many in our society. There is no higher morality just a wanton pursuit of pleasure.

Peterson's dynamic translation of this verse is very appropriate for the season. In the Message he translates, Luke 21:34 (MsgB)
"But be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap ... “

We may think that this is the life that we want, but the pursuit of pleasure above all else often leads us to despair.

What happens when we can get everything we want in life and it's not enough? Quite often we display addictive behavior. We drink too much or eat too much or work too much. Worries dominate our life. We have no focus, no purpose.

You've heard people say that someone is so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good? I would contend that the opposite can be true. There are some people who are so earthly minded that they no longer have heaven in their heart. There are some people who so consumed with the details of day to day living that they never stop to consider the big picture.

And it's in the big picture, the cosmic picture that we find salvation.

I believe that Jesus would have us "raise up our heads" and look for a salvation that comes from upon high. I think that Jesus would have us be alert to the big picture so that we might not overcome by the many distractions of life.

LOOKING UP INSTEAD OF ABOUT

To put it another way, in order to live effectively today, we need to have eternity in our hearts. How do we do that? How do we put eternity in our hearts? Jesus suggests that it begins with a life of prayer. Pray constantly.

We've talked about this before. Praying constantly certainly doesn't mean always closing our eyes and folding our hands in the classic pose of prayer. If we did that on I-4 we would soon be toast!

Praying constantly means to look at everything through the lens of prayer. Praying constantly means that we lift up our whole life to God and say,

"Lord, who I am and what I have today is yours. Use me for the glory of your kingdom."

And we do that with an eye toward that coming kingdom in which everything will be changed in the twinkling of an eye. We do that with hope. Hope is the sure expectation that the worries and disappointments of our life will one day be overcome by the God. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. God will put right what has gone wrong in our lives and in the world.

There many in our world, even some who claim to be people of faith, who have lost hope in tomorrow. They can't see how things will work out for the better.

I told someone this past week that the title of my sermon was "The End of the World as We Know It." And she replied, "Given what's been going on in our world lately, I can believe it."

And many of us would say the same thing. The end of the world is a pessimistic expectation. No good can come from what has been happening in our world recently.

But, our expectations for the future are not based upon temples destroyed, wars raging and economic insecurity. Our expectations for the future are not based upon loved ones who have disappointed us and betrayed our trust.

Our expectations for the future are based upon faith in the promises of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And what do we learn from Christ? We learn that God loves us; indeed we learn that God is love. We learn that God forgives us.

JOINING THE FUTURE

And we learn that God in Christ invites us to become a part of that kingdom of love and forgiveness. God in Christ invites us to do what our world cannot even imagine. God in Christ invites us to leave worry behind, love our enemy and do good to those who have treated us badly.

God in Christ invites us to look with awe upon the mystery of it all. The season of Advent begins with a sense of longing and wonder. We begin the season of Advent not only remembering the first coming of Christ but also looking forward to the second coming of Christ.

The hymns today are in a minor key. They express the despair that many of us feel, especially during the holiday season. And yet they offer hope in the middle of that despair.

Many of us have experienced loss during this past year, and the holidays only intensify our need for a Savior. And so we sing once O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel And ransom us as well. Many here today are captive. Many here today are in exile.

Lift up your heads. Your redemption draws near.

We sing come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us.

There are many here today that are afraid. There are many here today who feel a sense of remorse for the life that could have been. Listen to the good news of Advent. Your fears and your sins no longer have a hold on your life.

Lift up your heads. Your redemption draws near.

In the silly season of red nosed reindeer, shoppers camped out all night to buy electronics flashing lights, and loud obnoxious music, the season of Advent bids us take a more sober look at the world. The hymn urges us,

“Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.”

Do you feel overwhelmed by the demands of the season?
Do you feel caught up in a whirlwind that is taking you nowhere fast? Listen to the good news of Advent.

This season is about more than parties and drinking and shopping.

This season is about being still and hearing the voice of God in the cry of a newborn baby. This season is about a hope that comes from upon high and yet is as familiar as the child next door.

Lift up your heads. Your redemption draws near.

You see, the proper response to this text is not to be fearful but to be watchful. When times are tough, we need to remember that there is more to see than death and destruction.

Christ is at the center of the chaos in our text for today, and Christ is at the center of the chaos in our life as well. No matter what happens we are not alone.

I know that there are some who will be disappointed that we don't worship a Messiah who promises a stroll down Easy Street. But, we can take comfort in the fact that salvation is coming to the world, the real mean nasty world in which armies march and nursing mothers fear for the safety of their children.

Apocalyptic images look a whole lot like the images on the evening news. Those images are hard to bear.

But, the message of Luke's gospel is this, though the powers of evil are real and terrible, there are not permanent. They will not stand against the salvation that God sends. They will not endure to the end.

What endures to the end? We read about it in the prophecy given by Jeremiah.

By the power of God there will come a time when the world will not be filled with death and destruction. There will come a time when people will live in safety in a world filled with justice and righteousness.

Lift up your heads and strain to see that world. Live not by what you see today but by the dream that God gives you for tomorrow.

Today we once again are reminded that salvation does not come easy. It comes at the cost of body broken and blood shed. It comes at the cost of the death of God's own Son.

But, in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we also learn that even the worst that the world can do is no match for the best that God can do.

I still hold out hope that one day Hallmark will develop an Advent card based upon the second coming.

Can't you see it now? Scenes of destruction on the front and a warning, "Look out." And then on the inside of the card these words, "He's coming again. Have a watchful Advent."

No one would buy it of course. No one wants to dwell on such dreadful things during the holiday season.

But, maybe the pain of the second coming is a good reminder that the first coming wasn't so well received either. The world was not ready for a Savior like Jesus, and it's still not ready.

But, He is coming again. Get ready for a story that takes us all the way from the close of time to the manger in Bethlehem. As one preacher put it, we need to decorate our homes, light our candles and "catch a whiff of acrid smoke that rouses our senses to a holy future." Amen.

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