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11/30/2008

Mark 13:24-37 (NRSV)

"But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
[25] and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

[26] Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. [27] 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.

[28] "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. [29] So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. [30] Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. [31] Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

[32] "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. [33] Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. [34] It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. [35] Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, [36] or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. [37] And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

NEVER BUY GREEN BANANAS

In light of today's lesson I have one piece of advice. Never buy green bananas. You never know if you'll get to eat them.

No one knows the day or the hour when the end will come. Do your living today. Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.

You've all heard that advice before. But, it's so hard to take that advice. In my house we always buy green bananas, and quite often they go bad before we get a chance to eat them. It's amazing how quickly bananas go bad, and it's even more amazing how quickly time flies. All I have to do is look at the old photos of my family that I keep in the office, and I wistfully wonder where all the days have gone.

And yet, there is also an incredible sameness to life. Each day seems a lot like the next. And it's that sameness that lulls us to sleep sometimes.

This Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent our text is designed to wake us up. Jesus tells us, "Pay attention. It's later than you think."

And then he talks about cataclysmic events on the horizon. The sun will be darkened. There will be no more moonlight. The stars will fall.

ANOTHER END OF THE WORLD

But, we've heard it all before. There was a book written a while back entitled "84 Reasons the Rapture Will Happen in 1984." Some of us are a bit jaded about this end of the world stuff and with good reason.

I think I may have mentioned this before. When I was a student at Baylor University in Waco, Texas (back in 1974) there was a group called the "Children of God" who made a visit to our campus all the way from Chicago. These "Christian hippies" had an urgent message. The world was going to end Tuesday. Why they wanted to announce this amazing fact in the rather obscure town of Waco I'll never know. But they did.

Well Tuesday rolled around and of course nothing happened. When I went to class my religion professor began by saying, "Congratulations. You've survived another end of the world."

Forgive me if I'm not too fond of the "Left Behind" books and the television evangelists who have written yet another book explaining why Osama Bin Laden is the anti-Christ. I've seen too many green bananas ripen, and I've survived too many ends of the world. And to be honest, I even have a bit of a problem with today's text. In verse 30 we read that "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

Well, many generations have come and gone since that statement was made. If we think that the apocalypse is some sort of earth shattering, cosmic event then the gospel of Mark has missed the mark on this one. No wonder many mainline churches pay no more attention to Jesus' return than we do to fairies or unicorns.

But, what are we to do with this passage and many others in the Bible that are just like it? What are we to do with Jesus' admonition to be alert, to keep watch because we do not know the day or the time?

Jesus tells us to live our lives on tiptoe. But, to tell the truth most of us are flatfooted when it comes to the second coming. Don't talk to us about the second coming. We've survived too many of those already.

LOOKING FOR JESUS IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

The problem is that we are looking for Jesus in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. We are taking symbolic passages and interpreting them in a very literal way.

Apocalyptic literature can be very effective. But, it must be interpreted correctly.

Some of you may remember that I have said a parable is an “earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” That is a parable teaches us about the kingdom of heaven through a story about human beings. For example, the famous story of the prodigal son teaches us about the grace and forgiveness of God.

When it comes to apocalyptic literature, the definition is just the reverse of a parable. Apocalyptic literature is a “heavenly story with an earthly meaning.” Apocalyptic literature uses cataclysmic imagery to help us re-evaluate our daily routine. To put it another way apocalyptic literature causes us to ask, “In light of eternity what is really important today?”

One commentator suggested that the word apocalypse simply means a “tearing away.” In other words, an apocalyptic moment allows the veil to be removed from our eyes. It allows us to see what was always there.

DEATH BED PRIORITIES

It’s sort of like that comment that has become popular in recent years, “No ever said on his death bed, ‘I wish I had spent more time at the office.’” That statement uses a future private apocalypse (that we will all face) as a way of helping us put our lives today in perspective.

Now certainly all of us will need to spend time at the office in order to make a living, but we need to keep in mind why we work. This little phrase reminds us that work is not an end in itself. Work must be (at least in some sense) an expression of a higher call. That’s the meaning of the religious word, vocation.

All work can become a vocation, an expression of this higher calling if we do it with a view of eternity in the background. It’s not just about putting in 40 hours so that we can celebrate the arrival of the precious weekend. It’s about integrating what we do into a larger perspective. The apostle Paul noted that even the most humble work of service could be meaningful if it was done “as to the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:7 and Colossians 3:23)

The heavenly perspective transforms our daily life. That’s what it means to keep watch. It is a way of reminding ourselves that there is somebody and something greater than us. It’s a way of reminding ourselves that all things (good and bad) come to an end. And when that happens, then what will we do? What will be important to us when the final trumpet blows?

Mary Anderson put it this way, “The Bible’s teaching about the end times reminds us that we have failed to see history from God’s perspective. There is a bigger picture than just the snapshot of our lives. We don’t live in the moment; we live in all of history.”

END TIME HOPE

Some have made the mistake of being too specific and judgmental in their predictions about the future. But, we in the mainline church have made the mistake of thinking that thoughts about the end are unnecessary and even irrelevant to our daily life.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Anticipation of God's future is the power that animates the Christian life. We need to keep one eye on eternity, not so much out of fear but out of hope.

In Mark's gospel when it comes to the second coming the emphasis is definitely on hope. According to Mark when Jesus comes again he comes to gather his elect from the ends of the earth. (Mark 13:27) When everything is falling apart, God in Christ puts it all back together.

To say such a thing in Mark's day took a real leap of faith. The sun and stars might have still been in the sky, but many other things (such as the temple in Jerusalem) had been destroyed. It truly looked like their world was coming to an end before that generation would pass away.

But, in the middle of these cataclysmic events, the gospel of Mark does not counsel an abandonment of hope. Instead, Jesus tells his disciples to do their daily work with a sense of purpose and direction. If the slave doesn't know when the master will return so the disciple of Christ does not know when the crucial time will come either. Be prepared at all times. Be prepared by being faithful to what you are called to do today.

CHRISTIAN COOKING

One preacher suggested that we need to find balance when it comes to our view of the second coming. He wrote, "We have to admit that some of these passages have put us on some of our worst behavior. Believing that Christ is coming soon, many have done foolish things On the other hand we've overreacted against all that by thinking that Jesus isn't coming at all, growing cold ... unconcerned about the poor or God's coming judgment on sin."

He concludes, "The secret here, it seems to me, is like the secret of good cooking. You have to use heat or the thing won't cook. But, if you use too much, or don't stir enough, your food will burn and the feast is ruined. As Christians we have to keep the heat on. But, we can't keep it on too hot or we'll burn up and burn others out."

What we need, he suggests is a 2,000 year slow boil called the church. Who knows when it will be time to take the pot off the stove and cook up that heavenly banquet? Who knows when people will arrive from the East and the West and the North and the South to sit down at God's great thanksgiving feast?

But, we believe that one day that's going to happen, and it's never too early to start our preparations.

So, perhaps it's time for the frozen chosen to defrost just a bit. Perhaps it's time for us to turn up the heat and inject a bit more passion into the way we think about faith. Perhaps it's time to replace our complacency with a sense of intensity and urgency about the future ... not because we are worried but because we have hope and a vision of a new day.

IMAGINE THERE'S NO HEAVEN

My old preaching professor, Tom Long delivered a lecture at Yale University not long ago. It was entitled, "Imagine There's No Heaven: The Loss of Eschatology in American Preaching."

Translated this means that the famous Beetle, John Lennon was a prophet. No one thinks about heaven and the end times any more, not even the preachers.

Tom wrote,

"Preachers in 1850 spoke eloquently and frequently about the consummation of history in the return of Jesus Christ and of the pilgrimage of the soul toward eternal life, but they would have blushed at the mention of sex.

Today, many preachers are willing to discuss life's fleshier problems with the frankness of Jerry Springer, but the prospect of preaching a sermon on the Second Coming or Judgment Day chills the blood."

He continued,

"Evangelical preachers, too, have become evangelists not for the God who breaks in from the future but instead for progress, and their sermons have moved into the present tense genre of wisdom literature.

Consider Rick Warren, the Hawaiian-shirted, bare-ankled preacher to an SUV-driving congregation at California's Saddleback Church and the author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Among his sermons on healing hidden wounds, finding the courage to make a difference, and the essentials of life, Rick Warren will throw in an occasional sermon on heaven and the afterlife, but you get the sense his heart isn't in it.

As for Joel Osteen, the pastor of Houston's gargantuan Lakewood mega-church, his focus is firmly on the present tense, on *Your Best Life Now!*"

ESCHATOLOGICAL PREACHING

Tom's right. Sermons about the second coming among the mainline and even the evangelical churches are about as rare as hen's teeth. But, maybe that's the problem.

We don't need more "progress preaching" that tells people to "gird up their loins" and "use the world's resources" to create the kingdom of God here on earth. That kind of preaching is doomed to create a sense of failure and despair.

What we need is "eschatological preaching" that "brings the finished work of God to bear on an unfinished world, summoning it to completion." What we need is preaching on a "new heaven and a new earth" and an invitation to a future that is open to our labors but not of our own making.

I believe that this is profoundly true. What we need is less progress preaching and more eschatological preaching. To put it another way, we need more Advent in our lives.

Someone jokingly remarked this past week that my middle name is “Advent.” And that’s true. Each year I struggle to celebrate this all but forgotten holiday.

My neighbors already have a yard full of inflatable Santas and Reindeers that pop up and scare my dogs as we take our evening walk. The business people are already worried that our annual spending orgy might not be large enough to keep the economy chugging along.

And here I am once again, a voice crying the wilderness talking about the second coming. This is not an event that lends itself to glad carols and shopping sprees. The message of Advent is (as one theologian put it) about a God who loves you so much that he’s “gonna get you if you don’t watch out!”

As I said before, the word apocalypse simply means to lift the veil, to reveal, to uncover. And if our once a year reality check that we call Advent causes us to despair we need to ask why.

Advent is not a call to pie in the sky by and by. Advent is a time to wake up and smell the coffee here and now. Advent is a way of judging our dark world with the bright light of God’s presence as revealed in Jesus Christ.

When Christ came the first time they missed him. Why? They missed him because they were looking for him in all the wrong places. They wanted a kingdom based upon accomplishment and political power. What they got was a kingdom based upon grace and heavenly power.

The Bible tells us that they did not recognize this heavenly light. The darkness in their hearts was just too great. When Jesus comes again will we be more perceptive? Will we be ready?

I guess it’s appropriate that we begin the Christmas season by stuffing ourselves until we fall asleep. It is symbolic of the problem. We lull ourselves to sleep by buying too much, eating too much and entertaining too much.

It is just the opposite of how Jesus would have us prepare. Jesus would prefer a more lean and hungry approach to the season. Jesus would prefer a people who are hungry not for the things of this world but for the presence of God.

Several years ago there was a Christmas ad that summarized it quite well for me.

A beautiful model with her eyes closed and looking quite comatose held a beaded handbag. It cost thousands of dollars. The words “comfort and joy” were blazed across the page.

Advent tells us to open our eyes when we sing about comfort and joy this year. Advent tells us that we need to look for comfort and joy where they can really be found.

Here’s a hint.

It’s not in a beaded handbag that costs thousands of dollars!

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN