

Storm Warning
 First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 13:24-37

24 “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.”

TORNADO WARNING

This Tuesday as I quietly contemplated our Scripture for today in my study the alarm on my phone went off. I didn’t even know that my phone had such an alarm ... and I certainly didn’t know that it was so loud!

I about jumped out of my chair. What in the world was going on?

I looked at the phone and read this message, “Tornado warning. Take shelter immediately!” After sitting in the hallway for a few moments my secretary and I decided that the coast was clear, but that warning sure interrupted the flow of our day.

Up until that time I was struggling with how to describe the mood of Advent and especially our Scripture passage for today. I had my image.

Advent begins with a tornado warning. Advent begins by reminding us that when we least expect it the alarm will sound and Christ will come again.

What was it Jesus said? “About that day or hour no one knows.” But, when that day comes the signs will be unmistakable. “The sun will turn dark. The moon will not give its light. The stars will fall.”

Sound the alarm. Get ready for Advent. When Christ comes again there will be stormy weather.

STORMY FIRST COMING

We shouldn’t be surprised. The first coming of Jesus also brought stormy weather.

From the very beginning many rejected Jesus and sought to destroy him. They finally crucified him, and the Bible tells us that while he was on the cross the sun refused to shine and when he died the earth shook.

The Messiah who came was not the Messiah they wanted. And that spelled trouble.

But, the crucifixion was not the end of Jesus. It was just the beginning.

God raised Jesus and his Spirit filled followers began to upset the apple cart all over the world. I love that line from the book of Acts concerning the preaching of the gospel at Thessalonica.

The religious leaders brought some new Christians before the authorities and accused them in this way,

“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also.”

When Jesus came into the world, things changed. Jesus turned the world upside down and his disciples turned the world upside down as well. This was God’s way bringing about a new creation.

And it’s still happening. The coming of Jesus was the beginning of a new creation. And God is still in the process of creating a new heaven and a new earth.

But, the old will not pass away quietly.

There is still trouble when God’s ways confront our ways.

SEASON’S GREETINGS FROM FERGUSON

We saw what trouble looks like this past week. After the decision of the grand jury was announced there was violence in the streets of Ferguson.

And once again we watched it on TV.

Those who watched what was happening last week may have noticed a curious contrast.

The City of Ferguson had already decorated for the holiday season, and it just so happened many of the violent confrontations happened under a gaily lighted sign that proclaimed, “Season’s Greetings.”

The irony of that sign struck me. In the midst of violence, heavily armed police and tear gas we have a sign wishing us Season’s Greetings.

You had to wonder what season they were talking about, this Season’s Greetings from Ferguson.

The season I know offers peace on earth and good will toward men and women. But, this was a different season; it was a season of discontent and distrust.

The contrast was striking.

But, I wonder if that contrast doesn't give us insight into the power of the gospel.

In a world filled with violence and anger and fear, the angels come down and proclaim to the shepherds, "I bring you good tidings of great joy for all the people."

God is not going to leave us in our fear and our anger and our mistrust. Right in the middle of it all the angels give us God's seasons greeting,

"Don't be afraid. I have good news and it's good news for all the people. I'm not leaving you alone in this mess.

I'm here with you. I'm here for you."

BLIND AND DEAF

I bet most of the people who were part of those violent confrontations in Ferguson didn't even notice the festive sign that swung above their heads. They were too busy with the crisis of the moment.

And in the same way we too have become numb to the power of God's peace and good will. The signs and sounds of the kingdom are all around us, but we do not have eyes to see or ears to hear. We also are too busy with the crisis of the moment to notice the glory of the sign above us.

Someone likened it to people who live near the train tracks. You would think that the trains passing by in the night would wake you up. But, I have known people who lived near the tracks, and they told me that just the opposite is true.

After a short adjustment period they didn't even hear the loud train pass in the night. In fact the only time they woke up was when the train didn't come through on time!

THE TOUCHSTONE

This week in the Advent devotional booklet some of you will read the legend of the touchstone. Let me give you a preview.

According to the legend, if you found the touchstone on the coast of the Black Sea and held it in your hand, everything you touched would turn to gold. You would recognize the touchstone by its warmth. The other touchstones would feel cold, but the touchstone would turn warm in your hand.

A man sold everything, went to the Black Sea and began picking up stones, hoping to find the touchstone. After some days the man realized that he was picking up the same stones again and again. So he figured out a plan. He would pick up a stone, and if it was cold he would throw it into the sea.

He did this for weeks and weeks. Then finally one morning he picked up yet another stone. It turned warm in his hand.

But before he realized what he was doing, he threw it into the sea! He had the touchstone in his hand, and he threw it away. He had become so dulled by the daily routine that he didn't recognize what he had in his hand.

The same thing can happen to us during this special season.

Some of us have become so accustomed to the rhythms of the church year that we don't hear the message any more. The Advent warnings have become too familiar. The preacher exhorts his or her flock to keep awake and alert for the one who comes, and the sermon is met with glazed over eyes and yawns.

If we get too many false tornado watches we tend to ignore them, no matter how loud the buzzer. I suspect the next time my alarm goes off I won't head for the hallway. I'll just continue to do my work as if nothing had happened.

TWO-MINUTE WARNING

But, maybe we're looking at the message in the wrong way. Advent is not the beginning of the familiar. Advent is like the two-minute warning in football.

Many of us are football buffs, and we're familiar with the two-minute warning. The two-minute warning is a kind of alarm that tells the crowd, "If your team is way ahead, now is the time to go to your car and beat the crowds to the exit."

The two-minute warning tells the coaches, “If you are behind now is the time to pull out your best trick play and score a touchdown.”

The two-minute warning tells the players, “If you’ve been dazed by the last play, now is the time to shake off the cobwebs and play your best. The game is on the line.”

Advent is the church’s two-minute warning. Each year we sound the alarm. The game is about over. We need to wake up and get ready.

In Jesus’ day the fig tree put out leaves in anticipation of summer. Jesus said, “The signs are there. Just as the fig tree is getting ready for summer so the coming of God’s kingdom is near. Get ready.”

As we move from fall to winter we see the signs of the season. Up north the leaves are falling and in Buffalo the snow is falling. In Florida the snowbirds have arrived!

But, no matter where we live the signs are clear.

We are starting a new season. It’s time to get ready.

For some of us, that might mean putting up holiday decorations or Black Friday shopping. I like all the traditions. Enjoy them to your heart’s content.

But, try to spend just a little time thinking about what it means to get ready for the coming of the Lord. Jesus said that heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

NEW CREATION

What is this eternal message that comes to us each Advent? What does the coming of Jesus into our world and into our lives mean? How are we changed by the one who comes?

The message of Advent is the message of a new creation. This season of conflict and anger will not be with us forever. The one who comes is going to change things forever. It is the hope of a new heaven and a new earth. And we get a chance to live into that reality here and now.

This triumph of hope will be truly earth shaking.

The world as we know it can only imagine pessimistic outcomes. Indeed, in a perverse way we seem to revel in imagining how bad things will get.

But, Advent asks us to remember that since the world belongs to God it can be changed. This change will be so radical that it will be as if heaven and earth have passed away.

Mark's gospel clearly wants our daily lives to be informed by this hope.

We live in what I would call a sleepy church. Many Christians seem to think, "Since the time of Jesus' coming cannot be known, we don't need to think much about it."

But, Mark's gospel draws the opposite conclusion. Since the timing of the second coming is unknown, we should think about it all the time!

Modern Christians tend to think, "Since the time of the second coming is unknown, it could be hundreds or even thousands of years from now. Why worry?"

Mark's gospel draws the opposite conclusion. Since the timing of the second coming is unknown, it could be today! It could be this evening, or at midnight or at dawn! We better get ready! We better get our head in the game. The two-minute warning has sounded.

Advent invites us wait for hope on tiptoe. Advent invites us to long to know God fully. Advent invites us to try and see through the dark glass of the present and catch a glimpse of eternity, to experience Jesus Christ as he is and in so doing become like him.

RE-CREATION

People get the wrong idea about the coming of God's kingdom. The coming of the kingdom is not about destruction but re-creation. The coming of God's kingdom is an invitation to let go of what has gone before and to accept the new thing that God is doing.

In order to be reborn, sometimes God has to shake up our world. We experience it as destruction, but it can also be an opportunity to see things in a new way, to embrace the hope of God's future instead of remaining stuck in the mud of the old ways.

One author put it this way, "God enters the our hearts through the cracks and the broken places, and changes everything."

The African American spiritual echoes the destruction in our passage for today.

"My Lord, what a morning. My Lord, what a morning. Oh, my Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall. When the stars begin to fall."

That's not a mournful song. That's a joyful song. That's a song of hope. A people who lived in darkness dreamed of God's salvation, and that gave them strength for the living of their days.

That's how I suggest we look at this passage. It's a passage of re-creation. And the question for us is this: how is God inviting us to participate in this kingdom that comes? How can we be a midwife of this new birth?

A SIN PROBLEM

I read something this week that gave me a clue.

Benjamin Watson is a football player for the New Orleans Saints and a person of faith. And in response to the violence in Ferguson he wrote on Facebook,

"...ultimately the problem is not a skin problem, it is a sin problem.

Sin is the reason we rebel against authority. Sin is the reason we abuse our authority. Sin is the reason we are racist, prejudiced, and lie to cover for our own. Sin is the reason we riot, loot and burn.

But, I'm encouraged because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus ...a transformed heart and mind, one that is capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being."

Some things have to die in order for some things to be born.

This first Sunday in Advent we dream of a time when the stars will fall and the world will be reborn. Let us hang that vision over a violent and angry world even as we say once again,

“Come, Lord Jesus come.”

Amen.