

“Building Expectations”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 3, 2017

Mark 13: 24-37

The Coming of the Son of Man

‘But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. 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.

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

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 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. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

Isaiah 64:1-9

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—*

as when fire kindles brushwood

and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,

so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,

you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From ages past no one has heard,

no ear has perceived,

no eye has seen any God besides you,

who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right,

those who remember you in your ways.

*But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, on this first Sunday of the church year, this first Sunday of Advent, I pray that You would take the words that each of us carry within, our joys, and our concerns. I pray that You would take the words that we've proclaimed from Sacred Scripture. I wish that You would take the words that we offer in song and in prayer and take the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform them all by the power and mystery of Your Spirit into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word do it's work within us, among us, and through us. That we might be the light of hope in this world in which we live. That we might be Your people, that we might be Your presence. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

It's very good to have our dear friend, Paul Rider, back with us today. He's visiting from Florida. He was here this weekend to attend a retreat at the Mercy Center put on by the author, Wayne Muller, who wrote the book Sabbath which we've done as a book study. And the retreat was an Advent retreat on Sabbath and preparing for this sacred season. One of the things that I learned when I was on retreat with Wayne earlier this year in February out in New Mexico was that the Jewish people consider sundown the beginning of the next day. Rather than looking at the clock and thinking that the new day starts at 12:01 AM, the people of faith consider the new day to begin when sun the crosses the horizon. So Sabbath or Saturday actually begins at Friday night as soon as the sun sets. And it doesn't matter if it sets at 4:30, 5:30, or 8:30. Sabbath begins when that sun goes down. Now, the reason that I offer this is that in a sense, these passages that we hear from the prophet Isaiah and from the gospel of Mark seem to focus not on what we want them to focus on. The light of Christmas or the light of Jesus Christ. We've got the Christmas tree beautifully lit. We've got decorations up, poinsettias about, the Advent candle, the wreath. Everything is sort of moving towards that great and glorious Christmas morning when we get to celebrate. And then we get to these passages that are about heaven and being torn open, and mountains quaking, and stars that are falling, and sun that's dark, and moon that has no light, and kind of asking, "What is going on?"

I don't know about you but when I get ready for Christmas, the last thing I want to hear about is earth or mountains quaking, and peoples quaking, and the sun getting dark, and the heavens sort of agitated, and everything is going on, and-- like, "Whoa. I kind of just want Christmas to be here. I don't want this prophetic message. I want to sing Christmas carols. How many times have we heard that in the last 10 years, Mr. Stein?" It's that. Why aren't we singing Christmas carols? Because it's advent. It's not Christmas yet. But we all want it to be Christmas. I kind of think these passages are like what happens at some store where there's a malfunction

in the doors on Black Friday. I can just see a whole crowd of people counting down. 10, 9, 8. And getting ready. And the workers in there finishing their coffee, got their vest on, ready to greet everybody, kind of yawning. And we get three, two, one. And they push the door button to open it. And instead of the door opening it just sits there and goes [inaudible]. And the people all go forward and the door bend in, and then it kicks back and everyone goes [inaudible] like bowling pins in the parking lot [laughter]. That's what these passages are for us. They're like, "Wait a minute. Stop. It's not time yet. Slow down." Slow down.

The heavens are being torn open. The mountains are quaking. Brushwood is catching fire. The nations are trembling. What on Earth is God up to? The prophet stands among the people of faith and, in a sense, rails at God. Blaming God for their sin. Blaming God for the people's transgressions. You were angry and we sinned. You hid yourself and we transgressed. In a sense, the prophet is telling God, "It's all your fault that we are in the situation we're in." And to me, all of this is kind of an invitation, if you will, for us to not just stop and slow down, but to realize that all the goodness, and all the glory, and all the celebration of Christmas that all of us love, all the light, if you will, from the candles that are burning, not just of hope but of joy, peace, and love to come. And then the Christ candle. All of that warmth as we sing Silent Night on Sunday evening, December 24th, all of that special feeling as the kids pull their stage prop goats on skateboards across the chancel floor and hopefully, they don't fall over [laughter]. All of that goodness emerges in the midst of something really big, and large, and dark. Because the sun's not shining, and the moon's not giving light, and the stars are falling from the heaven.

And rather than being a horror story, my invitation for us is to see this as gospel for each of us. Because if it's true that the day begins when the sun goes down and darkness is the first movement, we all know and can trust that what follows is light, and life, and daylight. And so advent, for us, begins in darkness, on this first Sunday of the new church year. And we begin to move slowly, slowly, slowly towards the light. And the reason that it's gospel, to me, is because so much of how we live our lives, we always pretend that it's always light. It's always good, and it's never dark, or hard, or difficult. Just this morning, I had four people before the 8:15 service, ask me, "How's your back doing today?" And I said to each one of them, "Oh, it's fine. Thank you for asking." And I kept moving. If there had been a fifth [laughter] and I had the guts to be honest, I would have said, "Oh it's fine, except for those eagle talons at two and seven and that hot iron pressing between my shoulder blades." But we don't do that, do we?

Tomorrow the staff gathers to celebrate with Dee Robinson, our custodian of over 20 years, and his wife Tenisha. We celebrate the birth of their beautiful baby girl, Zoe Brielle. We're going to have a lunch and a baby shower, celebrate with cake and cards and lots of hugs and kisses. And yes, Karen, you can go first [laughter]. I can imagine tomorrow as Tenisha sits among us holding that beautiful girl - if she can get her back from all of us - and if one of us asks, "Well tell us, how's it going with this beautiful baby girl?" "Oh, it's going wonderful. We love her. Everything's great." Right? That's what we say in polite company. We're not going to hear, "Oh my Lord [laughter], I haven't slept in months [laughter]. I was really sick with morning sickness and then I had bed rest for a while. And oh, by the way, yeah our oldest child is in college and our second is in high school and now we have a baby in diapers." We're not going hear that [laughter]. Because we don't talk like that. We're not going to hear about your parent who's in the hospital having surgery. We don't hear about your spouse who's sick on the floor because they just had another treatment. We don't hear about those things because we are nice and polite and we're looking forward to celebrating the light.

As I said in the arise service listening to the prayers that were being offered, I took out my order of worship and as they were talking about God who's coming and the presence of God and hope, the light that's burning and peace and joy and love that's coming and Jesus that's coming at Christmas, I jotted down that our God is

also the god of darkness and doubt and death. And again, I hear that as gospel. I hear that as gospel because this past week I had the privilege and honor of spending some time with my in-laws in Idaho. My mother-in-law has dementia and my father-in-law has been hospitalized and now is in a nursing home - a rehab facility - recuperating from a horrible infection in his vertebrae. I went because there wasn't quite a plan yet put in place because no one imagined that they would be in this situation. My mother-in-law wondering whose house we were in, telling me for the 97th time that the dog was hungry and feeding it again. My father-in-law lying in his hospital bed saying, "I never imagined I'd be in this position." And me sitting there going, "Man I wish I were at Thanksgiving with Janny, but instead I'm here."

But if God can't be there in the darkness or struggle, then what are we doing believing that God can only come in the good times, when there's light, and joy, and peace, and love, and hope? If God can't come as you kneel in prayer beside your father's hospital bed wondering what's going to happen to him, then why are we here, gathering for worship in this beautiful space, trusting, as we do, in God's goodness? If God cannot be with you this season, in the loneliness and brokenness of your heart because of the death of a loved one, then once again, what are we doing here? In this time and in this place? In this light? It seems to me that the prophet is reminding us by yelling against God that we have a god who is not just the god of happiness or joy or peace or love or goodness. But that we have a cosmic god who's watching all things and involved in all things, even the dark things. Even the struggles. And so the writer of Mark gives us our invitation for the text. Keep alert. Keep awake. The invitation for us is to realize that even in the midst of our struggles, and our hurts, and our worries, and our concerns if we stay awake and attentive and open, we will see and taste and touch the presence of God.

Oh, that I might have seen the face of Christ in the bewildered look of my mother-in-law. Had I only been awake. While I was there, as is my custom, I awoke very early. I made myself a cup of coffee and I went out on their back patio. I looked up into the Idaho sky, where the light is very different than it is here in Missouri, and the Big Dipper was right there, blazing in all of its glory. I have this quirk of saying good morning to the stars and talking to them at times. But as I stood there that morning just looking up, I thought about three wise men coming from the east. I thought about what it would take, the courage and the faith, to follow a star over hill, across desert, to someplace that was unknown to them. To keep following and to keep at it until that moment when the stars stopped and they knew that they would find the child that they were looking for. And then it dawned on me that if it were never dark, they would have never seen the star. So this advent, in this season of celebration and good cheer, I want to invite you to not be afraid of the dark. To trust that God is always with us. And that if we keep going, we, too, will find the child. Amen.