

Mark 13:24-37

After that Suffering

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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[Jesus continued,] ‘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 Human One 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.’

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I’m going to tell a story on Patti Winter today. Last Tuesday at staff meeting, we were going over the Bible passages for this morning, when all of a sudden, Patti said, “I *hate* these scriptures!”

That cracked me up, but she has a point. For weeks now, we’ve been traveling through the last part of the Gospel of Matthew, with parable after parable of judgment, in which someone, inevitably, ends up in the outer darkness, weeping and gnashing their teeth. And, lucky Patti—*she* actually has to come up with *children’s* sermons based on these passages!

Now, with Advent, we’re finally into a new liturgical year—a fresh start in the Gospel of Mark—and where does the lectionary have us begin? Right smack dab in the middle of Mark’s apocalypse—his warning that, at any moment, the whole, known world can come crumbling down around us, so we’d better watch out.

Tidings of comfort and joy, these are not!

But here's the thing—or, as Patti would say, “Here's the deal”: It's not the *bad* stuff we need to stay alert to.

After all, no one has to tell us to pay attention to the bad stuff. How could we miss it?! Mark is writing to early disciples who have just had their whole world destroyed. In retaliation for a Jewish uprising, Rome had come in and smashed the Temple, destroying, with it, everything that their religion and their culture had rested on. For us, it would be like suddenly seeing a government at a standstill, a giant wall around the White House, unprecedented numbers of violent storms driving people from their homes, and a deadly virus decimating the population—can you imagine?

And for those early Christians, the destruction wasn't the end of the upheaval. In its wake, everyone was turning on everyone else. Rome was taking revenge on the Jews; the Jews were turning on the Gentile foreigners in their midst, blaming them for the catastrophe; and the early Christians, with their Jewish roots *and* their message that the realm of God was for Gentiles as well? They were a target for everyone. I'm pretty sure they didn't need Mark's nudge to keep them awake at night.

Don't we know a little of what they felt? Does anybody sleep anymore?

And just as for Mark's early listeners, when the dust settles from our current crises, things won't just go back to normal. In fact, there is no “normal,” anymore.

“After that suffering”—Mark warns us; “*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.”

In other words, nothing will look the same. Stay awake! Because the nation will be changed. The world will be changed. Our church will be changed.

Strangely, though, this is Good News, because when everything is cracked apart, it leaves an entry point for the realm of God to break in. *That's* what Mark tells us to stay awake for—not

the destruction, but all the openings for transformation that the destruction offers. We can't afford to get distracted or complacent, because in the midst of the mayhem, Christ is coming to us with a new vision in his hands.

So, what is that vision? In *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Brian Blount and Gary Charles describe Mark's interpretation of Christ's vision as this: "God desires a world in which the boundaries that separate people from each other...[will be] torn down and broken through."¹ All the boundaries. All the divisions. Given where we are, as a nation as a world, and even as a Church (big "C"), it's a long road from here to there.

And yet, this is a Good News passage.

It's good news because, if this is God's vision, it must be possible.

Good News because, hard though it will be to reach that vision, we won't be doing it alone. As Mark says, "they will see 'the Human One 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."

And finally, it's Good News because we don't start from a point of despair, but from a point of new hope—because what is the lesson Jesus tells us to look for? The fig tree, putting forth new leaves.

The fig tree, in scripture, is a symbol for the people of God. Destruction may be all around, but among God's people, we should watch for a new greening. New shoots coming forth. New energy. New life emerging.

I think we might be seeing that, already.

When we first went into this pandemic, there was so much fear. With the church shut down, would people fall away? Would they stop giving? Would they decide that church is irrelevant, and never come back? Will this be the end of the church?

¹ Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 11

Instead, something different has happened. You've stepped up with tremendous commitment. Giving has stayed strong—even though I know these times have caused some struggles for many of you. And though obstacle after obstacle has emerged to block church-as-usual, I've seen tremendous creativity and commitment to finding workarounds. It's not just that we had to shift abruptly to worshipping and meeting online—it's that so many of you have worked so mightily to figure out how to access those things.

Flexibility and responsiveness have taken priority. When George Floyd was murdered, the session changed its meeting time with just a day's notice so that members could show up at the protest. As the Racial Reckoning roared, Amy and Emily put together our own 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge, and a large number of you participated.

When Faith in Action, Alabama called for Voter Engagement phone banking teams, Ashley put one together with a few calls and emails—and, over three months, our church's team made thousands and thousands of contacts.

When we've had opportunities to worship outdoors, David and Steve and T.C. and Jonathan have mowed and picked up trash and made sure everything around the church was in good order.

We've continued to support First Light with meals and with money; and when their major fundraiser had to go to remote, there was Janell on our computer screens, tap-dancing away, along with so many others—and that fundraiser raised more than the gala ever had before.

And we've continued to care for one another. Prayers and cards and socially-distanced yard visits and phone calls and “How are you doing?” emails. The deacons hand-delivering care packages. Diane's idea for Chrismons-to-Go, so that anyone who wants to can have a little piece of the church in their homes this Advent. Though they've kind of run their course, my favorite thing was the Friday Shares, where we got to know one another's interests and hobbies in sometimes-hilarious ways.

And boy, have we learned how important music is. Though we can't gather in our sanctuary to sing together, the hymns that Hye-Sook and Jeff and our amazing choir members have posted online have been a salve for the soul.

We have learned, anew, how precious our congregation is.

When our children were little and we would leave for vacation, I was always the last one out of the house. Sam and the kids would be waiting in the car with the engine running, while I was frantically picking up every sock and stray toy, wiping down counter tops, putting everything in its place. There was always mayhem in our house, and I knew that when we walked back in the door, that would be my chance to see our house new, again. Instead of being fixated on the mess, and on all the different things that were wrong or needed fixing, I knew that, in that brief moment, before we dumped all our luggage everywhere, I would be able to see, again, what I loved about that house. See, with fresh eyes, why I had wanted that to be our home, in the first place.

In the same way, when we return, we will see our church with fresh eyes. I don't just mean the building—though, y'all: the plaster repairs look so good! I mean, our whole life together. What it is we're here for. The difference that we make for one another, and for this world with which God has entrusted us.

And we will see, with fresh eyes, what we *could* be.

“Stay alert,” Jesus says. And yes, we must remain vigilant to the forces of destruction in this world. There is always work to be done, and it's our job to do it. But if we fixate on that, we lose the reason *why* we're doing it. It's because there's something better beginning to bud. A greening in the midst of the rubble. That's what we can't afford to miss, because that is where Christ finds us.

In the hope, where things seem hopeless. In the peace where chaos once reigned. In the joy that finds its way through the cracks. In the love that keeps us together, even when we're apart, and sends forth new shoots, new blossoms, new fruits of faith.

That is the starting point toward the realm of God, in which all people can experience that unbounded love and justice and peace.

So keep awake—because this is an opportunity that God doesn't want us to miss.