



November 30, 2008

Preaching: Jim Best

Mark 13:24-37

“Coming Soon”

Have you ever stayed up late? I mean really late. So late that it is early? Me, I’m a night owl. I enjoy staying up late and I tell my wife, Beth that late at night is when I am the most creative, and do the best work and ...it’s also when I get the best scores on the computer games. It is not uncommon for me to come to bed at one or two in the morning. But sometimes, I’ll have a project that I’m really working hard on, and I’ll lose track of time...and the next thing I know, birds are singing.

Have you ever stayed up that late? It’s still dark out. The sun has not even begun to light the sky in the East, and yet the birds are singing. The birds somehow know that it is morning, and that the sun will soon be up, and they are all singing to meet the day. Like I said, it is still dark out, and I may not have a clock nearby, but I’ve been up late enough times to know what is coming, when I hear those birds singing, I’ve been up too long. It is a sign that it is no longer late, but early.

Jesus told his disciples to watch out for signs. So this is an especially appropriate reading for the beginning of this church season, Advent. The first week of Advent is often called the week of preview. In this week we look forward to the coming of Christ, and the joys of the season and New Year before us. Today we have the first of four candles burning to remind us of what is to come. Each week we will light another new candle, building our anticipation as we move towards Christmas.

Yet this is an odd little passage, isn't it? In this reading, Jesus tells his disciples of the second coming. He says that when there is a time of great despair

and suffering, there will be symbols and signs in the heavens and on earth, and the Son of Man will return in all his glory. He says, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." And that is sort of a troubling sentence isn't it? Does this mean that it has already come and gone? Some say that the generation that Jesus speaks of is actually in God's time, and so it could come at any moment. Others discount passages like this one as being later additions by "fire & brimstone" writers who are just trying to gain converts by saying "The End of the World is Nigh!" But I don't believe that. Jesus seems to be saying that all of that is going to happen soon, within one generation at any rate.

But then Jesus says "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 almost seems like Jesus is hedging his bets here, doesn't it? Like on the one hand he is saying, "It is coming soon!" while on the other he is saying, "But I don't really know." Like I said, this passage seems just a little odd.

And yet, odd as it is, this story is in all three of the synoptic gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke, they all have this story. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus expands on the signs. In today's reading he only says that there will be suffering, but the writer of the Gospel of Luke has Jesus say, "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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Jesus says there will be signs in the stars and the moon, and nations in turmoil and confusion. People will be upset and faint from fear of what is going to happen to them. Think about it...nations at war and in chaos. People depressed and living in fear and uncertainty. Sound familiar? Sound like the world today?

In verse 30 of today's reading Jesus tells the disciples that all these things will come to pass in their own lifetime. He says, "This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." He was saying that this was not something far off or only for their children or grandchildren to deal with, this was happening NOW. He was telling his disciples you are going to see signs of chaos and despair in the world around you, and when you do, you need to stand tall and raise your head high, and remember that the Kingdom of God is near!

In Alaska, I am told, there is a flower called Fireweed. It is a stalk that grows up to 8 feet tall, with blossoms all along the stalk. It begins to bloom starting in July with the blossoms closest to the ground opening first. As the summer goes on, the blossoms continue to open, and native Alaskans say that when the blossoms on the top of the stalk bloom, then the summer is officially over and winter is coming soon.

This past week, I was able to attend the National Youth Workers Convention in Nashville, TN. Six thousand youth leaders and volunteers gathered in one place to worship, share ideas, attend seminars and hear guest speakers. It was an amazing 4 days, and one of my favorite parts was getting to hear Dr. Francis Collins speak at one of the general sessions. Dr. Collins was the person in charge, the head of the Human Genome Project, an international group of scientists whose job it was to map human DNA. Dr. Collins is a geneticist, and he is a Christian. He has only come to Christ recently, and he talked to the convention about evolution and God and how he saw God's hand in creation and evolution. He said that God had given us two means to know him; two Books, for lack of a better term, to draw us closer to God. The first was the Bible, the words and scriptures of the Lord, and the second was the world itself. The world, Collins said was the ongoing way that we could see the hand of God in everything we do and everything that is. It was Dr. Collin's work on the Human Genome Project that drove him to seek out God and become a Christian, for as Dr. Collins was looking at the basic building blocks of life, he saw the hand of God at work, and recognized the signs for what they were.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus what the greatest commandment of them all was, Jesus said what? "You should Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your...mind." This last bit is important. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy, or rather mis-quoting it, because in the original, it does not mention Mind at all. Heart and soul are there, but not mind. Jesus is telling us we need to think, we need to use our heads, we need to stay awake and see the signs, see God in the world around us.

There are signs and signals all around us. Things we see and read everyday and never think of. A yellow light means a red light is coming, lightning means thunder will soon arrive, and a compliment from me often means the youth need chaperones for a lock-in or event. Signs we see and react to all the time.

In the gospels, a few days earlier, Jesus and his disciples were traveling between Samaria and Galilee. He'd healed some lepers and been thanked by one, and then began talking with some Pharisees, and they asked him about the

Kingdom of God. Jesus said something to the effect of, "You are not going to be wandering around and suddenly say 'here it is!' for in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is within us. The kingdom of God is **within** us. So if we look at all these passages together, we can take away a whole new view of today's reading. Looked at in this way, Jesus is saying to us that when the world is in turmoil and people around us are scared and unsure, we should not give in to despair and the worries of life, we should look for the presence of God in the world around us, and we should stand tall and hold our heads high for the Kingdom of God is near...for it is within us.

Now when Jesus says to stand tall and raise your head high, he is not telling us to get on our high horse, or look down our chin at the rabble cowering around us. He is not telling us to admonish those who believe differently than we. Jesus is telling us to stand tall, like the shepherd before the flock.

There are signs all around us. Signs that our world is in a time of turmoil. We are a nation at war, we have companies polluting our oceans and our air, we have children and adults trapped by drugs and alcohol. And I believe that Jesus says when we see those signs, we should hold our heads high and step forward as Christians, as children of God, as the Body of Christ in the World.

Many of you may not know this, but as United Methodists, we have a social creed, a set of basic beliefs about ourselves and our role in society. It says:

We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children, youth, young adults, the aging, and people with disabilities; to improvement of the quality of life; and to the rights and dignity of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.

And...We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world.

We believe in the present and final triumph of God's Word in human affairs and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the Gospel in the world. Amen.

Essentially it says that we will **stand up** for the rights of others when we see injustice being done. That we will **stand up** for peace and justice for all nations

throughout the world. That we will **stand up** for the freedom of all people everywhere, and that this act of standing up, this act of leading and protecting the flock is our job. It is our commission to manifest the life of the Gospel in the world. To let people know that when there is despair and confusion in the world, there are those who will step forward and lend a hand. So hopefully they will see that in our deeds the Kingdom of God is indeed near!

Advent is a time when we are reminded that when humanity was weighed down by sin and fear, they received signs of stars, and prophets and angels of a savior coming to help us all. It is a time when we are called to remember that it is our job as Christians to follow the example of Christ and spread the Kingdom of God into the world through our words and our deeds. This is our commission as Christians and as United Methodists, so that if someone is in trouble, if someone is fainting from fear and foreboding and the worries of this life, then they may take heart and know that help is coming soon.