

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“On Your Marks: Word of the Day”

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Mark 13:28-31

December 11, 2022

On this third Sunday of Advent, we continue our look at the thirteenth chapter of Mark in this series “On Your Marks.” If you’ve been with us, you’ll remember that the reason we’re looking at a part of Scripture that can be a bit challenging is because this part of Mark’s Gospel, a section of Jesus teaching a small group of his disciples, features a lot of talk, even troubling talk, about what was to come, about end times. After all, Advent as a season not only calls us to look back at Christ’s coming 2,000 years ago as a baby in Bethlehem, but also forward to his coming again in glory and power. How do we prepare our hearts, our minds, and our actions for both?

Well, the sort of things Jesus was teaching his disciples about wasn’t entirely reassuring—at least not initially. Talk of the Temple being destroyed, of persecution, of betrayal, of a “desolating sacrilege,” of suffering beyond imagining. Not exactly the sort of picture we tend to paint when it comes to Christmas. But as we’ve seen, the point of all of this, the point of everything Jesus is teaching his disciples, isn’t just to give them the willies, nor is that intent for us. It’s a word of caution, yes, even warning, but more than that, it’s a word that says, “Keep looking.” And that word, as we’ll see today, endures. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

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.

Mark 13:28-31

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Listen to this list of signs. They were given to us by a prophet named Meredith Wilson in 1951. A glistening five and ten. Glowing candy canes and silver lanes. Toys in every store. A pair of Hopalong boots and a pistol that shoots. Mom and Dad hardly waiting for school to start again. But the prettiest sign of all of them is of course the holly that will be on your own front door.

It's of course the song, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas," made famous by Perry Como. Maybe we haven't thought of that song so much as a set of prophetic signs, but try it on for a second. All these things you see; you don't see them at other times of the year, so if you start seeing them, must mean Christmas is around the corner.

Jesus said, "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know the summer is near. So also when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates." Jesus is saying, in just the same way that you know summer's around the corner by how a fig tree is growing and putting out leaves, you'll also know when the time is coming: when you see the sort of things I've been describing to you taking place. And just like "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas," once you start seeing them, you know it's all coming soon.

Never thought of that song as a tune of prophetic signs? Maybe try this version. "It's beginning to look a lot like the Apocalypse. The Temple's falling down." (You know I was really curious how that part would land.)

But obviously, Jesus is calling his disciples to be watchful and alert. That's kind of a running thread throughout this whole chapter: be ready, be prepared, "on your marks" as it were. And we'll talk more next week about just how difficult that is, to remain in that state of preparedness, and how the church is called to do just that.

But for now, we'll leave it at the relative speed that Jesus seems to suggest that all of these things were supposed to take place. It's language of "almost here," "the time is near," "at the very gates." The word "imminent" comes to mind. But then he says next, "Truly I tell you this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." And when you heard that, you might've thought, "Huh. Well guess he got that one wrong, didn't he?" And that's a fair point, because clearly, the people alive then—if that's what he means by "this generation"—have long, long since passed away.

But folks offer that maybe the word Jesus uses for "generation" isn't as much what we would consider a "generation," as in those born in a span of 20-30 years, as it's instead a very broad reference to our "type," as in, humanity. Still others offer that Jesus was referring to those who would be alive once these things started happening, meaning once the sequence starts, it'll all happen relatively quickly, in the span of a couple of decades, rather than centuries or millennia. And both of those are plausible, I guess. Not sure that's the big point I'd want for us to take from this, but it might have caught your ears so I thought I'd address it.

No, what's more striking to me is the speed with which Jesus seems to be saying all of this is going to happen, whenever it happens. It's not the slow drip or the gradual decline. It's as if things are crumbling fast. So look to the fig tree, and learn its lesson.

You may know this lesson from elsewhere. Creation seems to give us cues on occasion. Eighteen years ago, it was recorded in a coastal village in Indonesia how a herd of water buffalo close to the ocean suddenly stopped, pricked their ears up, turned their heads out to sea, and then suddenly and in unison turned around and stampeded to the top of a nearby hill, just minutes before the deadly tsunami crashed into the shoreline. Similar reports, not just then, but in multiple instances, of dogs, birds, elephants, even a sea turtle doing something similar that in hindsight is noted as their avoiding the effects of the disaster.

Or just a bit closer to home. Eight years ago, in the Cumberland Mountains, an enormous flock of golden-winged warblers had arrived to their breeding grounds after an over 3,000-mile migration from South America. Normally they would stay there for a few months. But all of a sudden, they flew off to another area over 400 miles away. No one could explain why. Until shortly after, the region was hit by a storm system bringing about over 80 tornadoes and over \$1 billion in damage, but presumably, no warblers were harmed.

The message here is that sometimes calamity falls quickly, and the time for just closing your eyes is long past.

My grandfather, my mom's dad, had a bad habit of closing his eyes during troubling times, or at least in one scenario. Having grown up in the very small town of Kinston in eastern North Carolina, he never quite got accustomed to big city living, even if that big city wasn't all that big, just Wilmington, North Carolina, and this was decades ago.

In particular, he apparently could never really get used to people being in such a hurry when it came to driving. Folks had cars in Kinston, of course, but there wasn't really anywhere you had to get to in a hurry, and even if you did, it would never take you long to actually get there. So the notion of someone honking their horn at someone else wasn't really something he encountered all that much.

So when they moved to Wilmington, where everybody seemed to be in a big ole hurry, he would not respond well to that kind of pressure. If he was driving and someone honked their horn at him—and who knows why they did it, could be the legit, “Hey you're crossing into my lane, I'm here, don't hit me,” or the less polite, “Get out of the fast lane,” I don't know—but whenever someone honked their horn at him, he would stop the car, close his eyes tight until the honking stopped. I know what you're thinking, “It's a miracle I'm even here.” Plus, you would think that

stopping in the middle of traffic would just bring on more honking, but nevertheless, that's what he did. He closed his eyes.

What Jesus is saying here is, "Don't close your eyes. Even when things escalate quickly, even when it looks like things are crumbling so fast you don't know where things even are anymore, even when everything you know seems to be thrown into upheaval and every instinct you have says to close your eyes just to get some relief from it, don't close your eyes."

But the reason he gives isn't, "*You* have to be strong; it all depends on *you*; *you* must overcome all of this adversity." In fact it's kind of the opposite. He's been saying all along that it *won't* depend on you. Instead he says, "Heaven and earth will pass away," but then did you catch what he said next? "But my words will not pass away." Everything may crumble, he's saying, but you know what won't? My word, my word to you.

Throughout this series, we have maintained that the season of Advent isn't a time of empty cheer, at least not at its most powerful, not as it could truly be. It's a word of comfort in a time of grief; a word of hope in a time of despair; a word of light in our darkest hour.

The amazing thing, when we're talking about "words" and all, is that the word that breaks into the darkness isn't strictly a word, it isn't first and foremost something that is pronounced or written. It's a who. It's Christ himself. Some of you may have heard before the opening of the Gospel of John, this description of the "Word of God" and how that Word was not necessarily something written down, but the proclamation of God being God himself and, miraculously, the Word becoming flesh. That's what we celebrate on Christmas Day, the Word become flesh, of grace coming to dwell among us, of God taking on mortality that we might have life.

The promise here, then, that Jesus makes, that even though heaven and earth will pass away, his words will not pass away, is not that his words, his teachings are so indelible by themselves or so accurate in their predictions that they will hold up on their own and stand the test of time. The power of Jesus' words isn't that they're so profound by themselves; it's that *he* said them. Jesus' words rise or fall based on whether he is who he says he is. If Christ is the Word made flesh, if Christ gave himself up and died on the cross, and if Christ rose from the dead, then what he says is of the highest importance and of the highest assurance.

I think that's a point Jesus is trying to get across here to his disciples, even though he knows they probably won't get it. That his words of warning and of hope, his call to be on the watch, to be ready, would not be in vain. Why? Because he's so good at predicting the future? That's not the point. Because he is who he says he is.

Friends, this Christmas, any number of you may feel even right now like things are just crumbling around you, like it's all happening so fast you can't keep things straight, like heaven and earth itself are passing away.

It's to you that this message of hope comes. And it's when things are spiraling faster and faster that the word of hope is even nearer, at the very gates. But don't close your eyes.

I wish I could promise you that, whatever it is that you're facing this Christmas, whatever it is that makes the season look like something it shouldn't look like, deliverance is surely coming and all will be resolved, but that's not a promise I can make. What I can declare, and what I hope comes as assurance, is that Christ is indeed who he says he is, and his words of faithfulness, of redemption, and of a promise to come and make things right, to make things well, will never pass away.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.