

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“On Your Marks: The Lookout”

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Mark 13:14-27

December 4, 2022

On this second Sunday of Advent, we’re continuing our look at a challenging section of the Gospel of Mark—to the point that you might find yourself asking, “What does this have to do with Christmas?” But I hope that this look might expand how we consider this season of worship, of Advent as a season of preparation, of getting ready, for the coming of Christ anew. As Pastor Mark so eloquently put it last week when we kicked off this series, “We need a hope that draws us into God’s future to bring meaning to our daily lives. This is Christian hope.”

We pick up where we left off last week, with Jesus continuing to speak with a small group of his disciples, sharing some troubling words of what was to come. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

¹⁴ ‘But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; ¹⁵ someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; ¹⁶ someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. ¹⁷ Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! ¹⁸ Pray that it may not be in winter. ¹⁹ For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. ²⁰ And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. ²¹ And if anyone says to you at that time, “Look! Here is the Messiah!” or “Look! There he is!”—do not believe it. ²² False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³ But be alert; I have already told you everything.

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.
Mark 13:14-27

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.

Imagine with me, if you will, what you would think, how you would feel, if on the way to church this morning, maybe you came down Keowee and before you could even see the whole church you saw the Tower steeple rising above the other buildings and houses, but on top of it, instead of a cross, you saw a pentagram, or once you came inside, instead of Christmas greenery, you saw withered, dead plants, or during worship, as we gathered around the communion table, instead of the loaves and wafers and cups, you saw only flies and mold. How would you feel? What would you think?

I would hope you would think something was off, at the very least. But more than likely, you'd feel like I would: that something was very, very wrong.

That unsettled, disturbed feeling is perhaps a small semblance of what Jesus is referring to here in this passage. In this whole section of Mark, Jesus is speaking with a group of four disciples: Peter, James, John, and Andrew. The "who" is important enough, but it's the "where" that, to me, gives this whole thing so much punch. They're sitting in a place called the Mount of Olives, which they'll all come back to later on, but it was a hill immediately to the east of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

So imagine Jesus and these four disciples, sitting on this hillside, overlooking the Temple in Jerusalem. Then Jesus goes into these troubling words on all the hardship that would befall that place and that city.

The phrase he uses is "the desolating sacrilege," there in that opening verse, v. 14: "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains." "Let the reader understand?" you might think. How am I supposed to understand that? Because it seems to assume that someone would have an idea what that's talking about.

For sure Jesus was talking about something that would happen, something to look out for, but the phrasing, the imagery would have evoked some strong reactions for Peter, James, John, and Andrew.

You see years earlier, about 200 years earlier to be precise, there was a king named Antiochus. Greek king. Part of the remnants of Alexander the Great's empire. Not the most reasonable sort of person, apparently. He was by most accounts capricious, erratic, and, at times, vindictive. Taken with his own image, he started attaching to his name a particular title, "Epiphanes," which means, "God Manifest" or "God Revealed." And he intersects with the biblical world through his violent quashing of a Jewish revolt. If you're familiar at all with the story of Hanukkah, same sequence of events. Same guy.

And so the story goes, when Antiochus put down the revolt, he outlawed Jewish sacrifices and temple rites and established the Temple in Jerusalem as a shrine to Zeus. As another story goes—and this one is a bit more in question—Antiochus himself came to the Temple, went inside to the very altar of sacrifice, and upon it slaughtered a swine, an unclean animal according to Jewish law, and left.

I mean, as far as power moves go, that's pretty brazen. A foreign king fashioning himself as "God Revealed" suppresses a revolt, comes to the Temple, this sign to the people that God was with them, goes inside and kills that which would render that holy space defiled, hence the term "desolating sacrilege," and then he leaves with impunity.

Think of how that would affect an entire people. It was as if all that they held as sacred had been attacked. We're talking core, foundational things here. What would that do to the heart of a people?

That is what Jesus is invoking. Something like *that* is going to happen, and when it does, everyone must take cover. "Those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat." And everyone will be vulnerable, but especially those who would be vulnerable already: "Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be."

All of this, Jesus is saying, as he and those four disciples look out upon the Temple, upon this structure, this sign of God's very presence and faithfulness with a people. He's saying hard times are coming.

But that's not where Jesus leaves it. (That's never where Jesus leaves it.) A bit later on, in v. 24: "But in those days, after the 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,"—things haven't really improved, it sounds like—"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."

Jesus is offering not just a prediction of suffering and hardship, but a hope for the power and the glory to come, of Christ's return, who will gather up his people from the ends of the earth.

As I shared a couple of weeks back, Advent as a season doesn't just look back toward the coming of Christ as a child in Bethlehem. It looks ahead to the coming of Christ in power and glory. That's what this is talking about. But notice that these are not just flowery words of hope in a cheery world.

If I have a beef with the way Christmas is celebrated culturally—and watch out, this is my inner Scrooge coming out—it’s that it seems that once Thanksgiving is passed, a switch is flipped, and after that point, it’s a month-long onslaught of in-your-face cheeriness and jingle bells and let’s-all-be-happy-it’s-Christmas and if you’re not on board with all that cheer and happiness then clearly you’ve missed the point and you just need to get into the Christmas spirit, and it’s as if we never take a step back and ask why.

Now please don’t misunderstand me. Not saying we should all be down in the dumps throughout December. But when what we consider to be “Christmas cheer” is just the sound of jingle bells and Christmas lights, it becomes empty, and it definitely doesn’t stand up to what many if not most actually face during this season.

This past week, Reverend Janna and our Stephen Ministers led a worship service called “Out of Darkness.” It’s the second time we’ve done this—you may have seen the bit on the news last week highlighting the service. And I think it’s so important we do this each year, because it’s a time we directly acknowledge that for some, if not many, this season is not so easy, not so cheerful. Instead, it’s all too often a reminder of what has been lost—loved ones who have passed, relationships that have become estranged, grief made all the more noticeable when just by some weird form of peer pressure it can feel like you’re the only one struggling when it seems like everyone is supposed to be cheerful.

You don’t have to be grieving the loss of a loved one to understand this. You could facing any kind of crisis that seems only to get exacerbated during this season. Families under stress. Loneliness. Struggles with illness. Professional or academic anxiety. But then on top of it comes this surreal feeling that if you’re not happy all the time you don’t fit in.

And so the result for too many is to retreat into isolation, to feel as if the grief or the pain you feel somehow taints all of it or disqualifies you from the joy, the true joy of Christmas. And that goes against the very message, the good news of this season, which isn’t “Jesus came 2,000 years ago, therefore let’s be artificially happy for a month.” It’s “In our darkest hour, the light of God will shine.”

We see that in this passage. And there are signs of that light even in the dark times, even in times that seem to desolate everything else.

Just the other day, our International Missionary Committee was hearing from our partners Kristi and Bob Rice who serve in South Sudan. Bob teaches at a seminary and college, while Kristi’s work focuses on healing and reconciliation work.

And if you are familiar at all with recent history in the country of South Sudan, you’ll know that there is a lot of work to be done in healing and reconciliation. It’s a country that has been

torn by civil war—it's formation as a country was the product of a civil war—but alongside that conflict, there has been violence and vendettas on a smaller scale throughout, conflicts between regions and tribes. That conflict, they shared, creates a culture of revenge, prejudice, hatred, and an ongoing cycle of vengeance.

Kristi shared with us how in one instance she was leading a group through a workshop. It was at a UN refugee camp, so you hear this passage on fleeing when violence comes, that's not theoretical for them. They live that. But in this group, she and the local leaders were trying to approach the question, "How can we say that God is love when we recognize so much suffering and wounds within our history, our culture, our families?"

Remember, this is at a refugee camp, so all these different groups of people, groups and tribes who may have until recently been in violent conflict with each other, are suddenly thrust into close quarters.

So one woman comes forward. She shared that her husband was part of a group who had attacked a community not far away, killing some of the people there. She shared that she knew that was wrong and expressed her sadness that it had happened and that her husband had taken part in it.

As it turned out, several other women in the group came from that same community, the one who had been attacked, who had had relatives, even family, among those harmed. So her just saying that had the potential of tainting everything about that group. "It was all well and good, but then we found out that so-and-so's husband killed people in my family, and I simply couldn't get past that." That would be understandable. But that's not what happened. The other women in the group, those who were from the community that was attacked, came up to the first woman, and were the first to offer her forgiveness. One said, "Now I see that not everyone from that clan is attacking me or hating me. Now there's space to forgive."

The good news of this season isn't in the unblemished cheer of the holidays. It's in the glimmer of hope, of a word of forgiveness piercing where there was hatred, of comfort breathing where there is grief, and of light shining in the darkness. It's seeing that which might otherwise be a desolating sacrilege, tainting everything else, but looking ahead to see with hope the Son of Man coming to gather his people to himself, and to make all things right.

This is the hope of this season. It's not empty or artificial. It's what Christ calls us to look for.

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