

Teach our hearts to welcome hope

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

1st Sunday in Advent - November 29, 2020

Texts: Isaiah 64:1-5, 8, 9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;

1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Mark 13:24-37 With Advent and the beginning of a new church year, we plunge into the Gospel of Mark, our guide through this year. However, we begin near the end of Mark, in a chapter sometimes called the “little apocalypse.” Here, Jesus foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and describes the events that herald the end of the age. Remember, though, that apocalypse doesn’t necessarily refer to catastrophe, but to the revealing of truths once hidden. The suffering Jesus refers to is described earlier in the chapter: events that occurred in the year 70, events so terrible people were sure they would usher in the end of the world and Jesus’ return.

“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.” Heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of our God stands forever. Amen.

Happy new year! Don’t you wish? My sister sent me some humor circulating on the internet. Here’s a piece: Some day “2020” will be the one-word catchphrase for everything messed up and

bad. Example: “How’s your day?” “It’s a total 2020.” “Say no more.” Sorry, there’s still a calendar month to go in 2020, but today *is* the first day of a new church year. Hallelujah!

So why do we start the church year with a “little apocalypse”? In fact, we only heard a piece of Mark 13; if you read it all, it is truly the stuff of nightmares. “Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, the desecration of holy places, people fleeing the blood and blazing fires with no warning, no time to turn back even for a coat to wear.” We know that occupying forces of Rome did wreak brutal destruction on Jerusalem in 70 CE. We know some of Jesus’ friends lived to see the tragedy. We know this: the year 70 was bad. A total 2020.

And we know this. God’s not the destroyer, then or now. But God was present. God was with those whose lives were upended. Their spiritual home was in ruins, their temple polluted beyond cleansing. Suddenly, they had to let go of the time-bound, imperfect human institutions and open their hearts to the eternal reality underneath them: the living God. The God of hope.

And so Mark also offers, in contrast to the sound and the fury, one of nature’s slowest and gentlest images: the budding of a tree: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: look for the buds. Look for the signs of God’s coming into your life. Look for the signs of God’s presence. They are there. But you must watch. And wait. And work. What does this mean?”

I believe the danger is not so much that we will close our eyes as that we will close our hearts. Because we don’t know when our travail will end. We do know that conditions are still ripe for spiking coronavirus, out of control wildfires, ever more violent hurricanes, wars and human rights abuses at home and abroad. But that doesn’t mean that we are isolated in our fears, or powerless to respond. We just need to look for God in the right places: Thomas Merton, prophet of the mid-20th century, wrote in 1963: “We can no longer afford to equate faith with the acceptance of myths about our nation, our society, or our technology; [we cannot] equate hope with a naive confidence in our image of ourselves as the good guys against whom all the villains in the world are leagued in conspiracy.”¹ Apocalypse reveals the flaws in our systems. To paraphrase the old song, we’ve been “looking for God in all the wrong places.”

What I believe God is asking us to do is to take a step back from the things that shock and scare us, and look elsewhere for the signs of God’s presence. Here in Rochester. God shows up in the Iraqi family down the street from us, who press food on us during Ramadan, and festoon their house with Christmas lights. God shows up in a Nigerian Pentecostal congregation providing food and necessities to desperate families, and offering free health care to uninsured neighbors.

¹ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (University of Notre Dame Press: 1968), 203–204. Quoted in Richard Rohr’s daily online devotions, Wednesday, November 25, 2020.

God shows up every time a respiratory therapist or ICU nurse in mask, gown, shield, and gloves holds the hand of a dying patient whose family weeps at home, separated by covid.

God showed up for our family last Christmas in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith celebration, where menorah candles were lit and the Hanukkah blessing was sung in Hebrew; and the table grace was spoken by a Muslim woman from Myanmar, all under the gentle glow of a Christmas tree - that beloved transplant from pagan, pre-Christian, tradition.

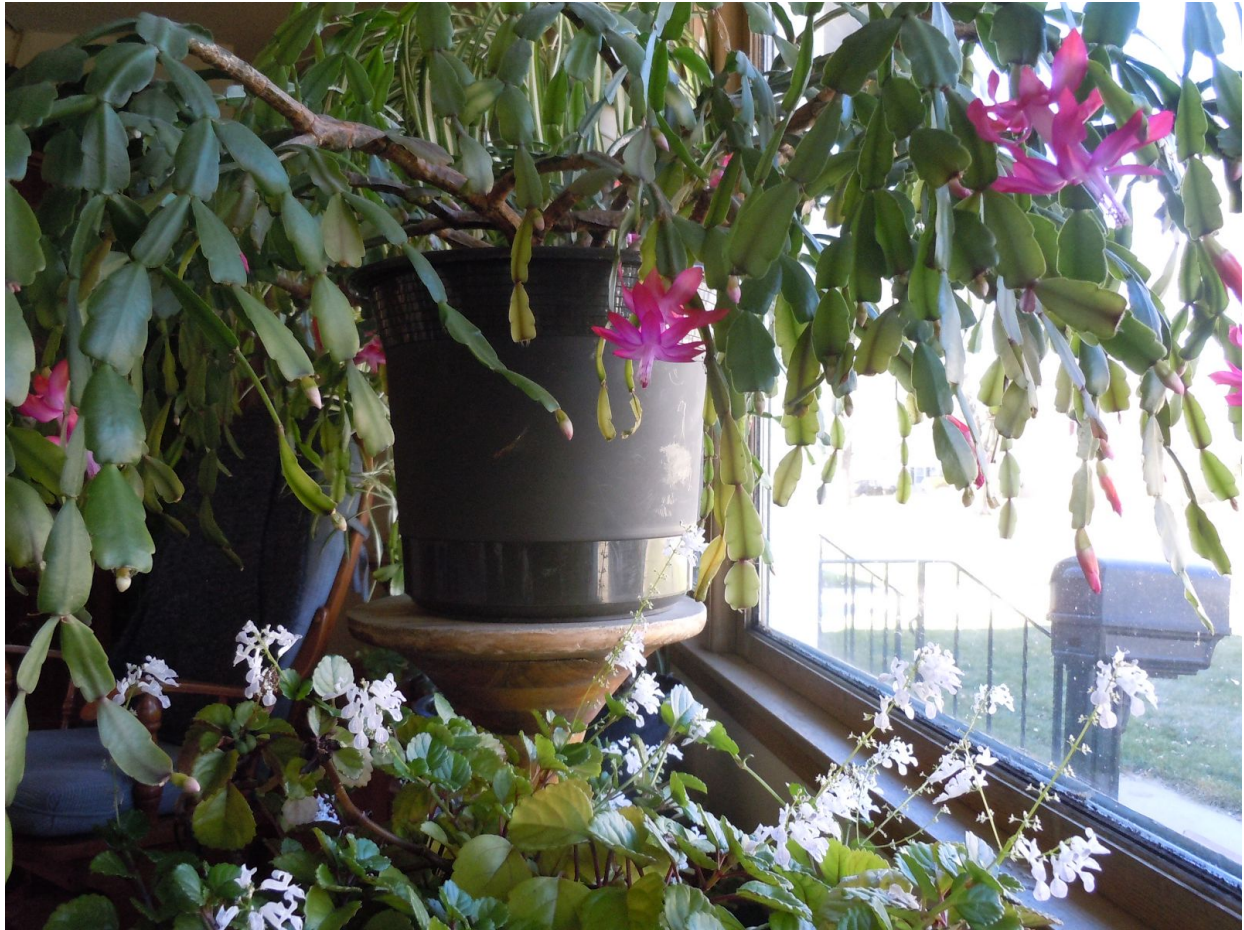
God shows up around the world in camps where refugees are not helpless dependents, as we often think of them, but self-sufficient people who organize and govern themselves, and teach their children well enough to go on to study in global universities..² God shows up in war-torn communities when unarmed experts in non-violence protect civilians and negotiate peace. God shows up again when those experts use the same methods for de-escalating violence in Minneapolis public schools.³ God shows up when Indigenous and Black peoples steadfastly insist on telling the truth about their own history. God shows up when members of the dominant culture finally listen to them. God shows up when we accept that our interdependence as human beings is inescapable.⁴ God shows up when we honor the humanity in one another, when we open our hearts to them.

It may sound counter-intuitive, but it's in learning about and respecting other people's beliefs that I grow most deeply convinced of my own. Presbyterians affirm that Jesus brought something new to earth and changed the course of history. As I read this affirmation, I want to show you a very personal image of God showing up in my life:

² I got this from a reputable source on the internet; unfortunately I have lost the link.

³<https://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/>

⁴ <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2019/11/27/thanksgiving-colonial-gap-heal/>. See also articles referenced on our website, cpcroch.org and in our Thanksgiving week Email blast.



The Christmas cactus has been with me since 1990, a gift of hope when I was going through a hard time. The Swedish ivy is a descendant of a cutting from the home of Bill W, a gift of hope from a friend celebrating her recovery from addiction. The delicate white blooms of the ivy reach upward toward the downward arching buds of the cactus. So slowly and silently they move; this picture that I watch morning by morning speaks to me of God's love, forever budding, always new, eternally reaching toward us; of our yearning for God, stretching upward. They teach my heart to welcome hope: hope that comes silently, slowly, but always showing up when I need it most.

Listen to the affirmation of faith: "Out of Israel, God in due time raised up Jesus, whose faith and obedience were the response of the perfect child of God. As the Christ, he was chosen to be the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel, the beginning of a new creation, and the pioneer of a new humanity. God in Christ gave history new meaning and direction and called the church into a ministry of reconciliation for the world."

Where is God showing up in your life today?

Let go of time-bound, imperfect human institutions and cling to the eternal reality underneath them: the living God. The God of hope. We know neither the day nor the hour, but we do know Who is coming. We can trust that presence, we can trust that God will show up. Open your hearts to hope.

Prayers

God of time and eternity, we give thanks for a new year of gathering as your people - separated in space, but bound together in love for you and one another. Grant this congregation the will to watch, wait, and work together this year.

You are perfect in power, in mercy, and in love: help us not to identify too closely with failing human institutions, but instead to look to you and lean on your everlasting arms.

Hope is the gift that sustains us through tense and troubled times: may we bear hope to those who need it: those who labor valiantly against the virus, caring for all who need them;

May our prayers bring hope to those who have lost homes and livelihoods in this year's fires, protests, closures, and storms. May we be your hands and feet to those who need what we can offer; may we show up as your presence. May we learn to lean more and more on you.

We pray for all who are ill, or isolated, or in poor conditions, wherever they may be, and especially those dear to this family of faith...

God, our ultimate healing always rests in you. We pray for the families of those who have gone home to you, whatever the cause. Hold them in your firm embrace, that not one of these little ones you died for may die in vain. Remember us all in your kingdom and teach us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed.....