

Title: *Be Prepared*

Text: Mark 13:24-37

Robby Robins was an Air Force pilot during the first Iraq war. After his 300th mission, he was surprised to be given permission to immediately pull his crew together and fly his plane home. They flew across the ocean to Massachusetts and then had a long drive to western Pennsylvania. They drove all night, and when his buddies dropped him off at his driveway just after sun-up, there was a big banner across the garage— “Welcome Home Dad!”

How did they know? No one had called, and the crew themselves hadn’t expected to leave so quickly. Robins relates, “When I walked into the house, the kids, about half dressed for school, screamed, ‘Daddy!’ Susan came running down the hall—she looked terrific—hair fixed, make-up on, and a crisp yellow dress. ‘How did you know?’ I asked.

‘I didn’t,’ she answered through tears of joy. ‘Once we knew the war was over, we knew you’d be home one of these days. We knew you’d try to surprise us, so we were ready every day.’

It’s great sport in the Christian world to try to figure out when Jesus Christ will return and bring this era of human history to its final consummation.

This is the first Sunday of Advent so it may seem unusual that we would even be looking at a passage about the end of time instead of looking back to Bethlehem. We are reminded that what was begun at the first advent of Jesus Christ will be completed.

This story really highlights for us, among other things, that the meaning of Advent is that God is no longer content to dwell in a temple made of stone, but instead wants to live in our hearts. That will become more apparent as we go along.

The setting for the story is this. It is nearing the end of Jesus’ life on Earth. The crucifixion – the reason for him coming to Earth in the first place is drawing near. Passion week begins in Mark 11 which means that this discourse which scholars call the Little Apocalypse in Mark comes right in the middle of the last week of Jesus’ life. It’s interesting that that week kicks off with Jesus cleansing the temple and now in the middle of it, he kind of busts his disciples’ bubble when it comes to their being awestruck and having their breath taken away by the temple.

In 13:1, he is leaving the temple area with his disciples and one of them turns to him and says, “Wow! Look what massive stones! Look what magnificent buildings!” I doubt that he was expecting any particular kind of reaction. He was just reacting the way a lot of us would at the sight of the temple. When I was a freshman in college, I brought my roommate home with me and I took him sightseeing in Washington, DC. He was from a small town in South Carolina and had never really been anywhere and it was interesting to watch him gaping at all of the sights in DC. He was trying to frame a picture of the Jefferson Memorial and I was scared

to death he was going to walk backwards into the Tidal Basin.

Maybe he thought Jesus would say something like, these are awesome and they're ours!

Instead, he said, "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." The temple had been destroyed and rebuilt one time before in Israel's history. The Babylonians had sacked Jerusalem and sent the people of Judah into exile. It was one of the most devastating and traumatic things that they'd ever experienced.

The disciples are shocked by this. They're asking, "Tell us when this will happen. How can we know when this will happen?" Jesus goes through a series of events or conditions which will foreshadow the end.

It's written in a style that we call apocalyptic. Images and symbols which people who are supposed to get it will understand and those who aren't won't. It's almost like it's written in code. There are two things going on here – the destruction of the temple which happened in AD 70 and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus has said, "No one knows the day or the hour when that will happen, not even the Son."

He says in 5-8, there will be false messiahs and wars and rumors of war. In 9 through 11, he says, "You'll be put out of the synagogues and you won't always be loved because of your friendship with me." That antipathy that people feel toward you will even extend to your own family.

In 14 through 23, he talks about the Abomination that causes Desolation occurring. This alludes to a man by the name of Antiochus Ephiphanes who around 170 BC sacked Jerusalem and profaned the Temple. The book of the Maccabees says:

Not long after this the king sent an Athenian senator to force the Jews to abandon the customs of their ancestors and live no longer by the laws of God; also to profane the temple in Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus, and that on Mount Gerizim to Zeus the Hospitable, as the inhabitants of the place requested...They also brought into the temple things that were forbidden, so that the altar was covered with abominable offerings prohibited by the laws. (Namely, a pig.) A man could not keep the Sabbath or celebrate the traditional feasts, nor even admit that he was a Jew.

Jesus says something like that is going to happen again so you need to be prepared and when you see this happening, get out of dodge as quickly as you can. All the time, while this is happening, there will be false messiahs who make claims for themselves. Someone has said, "The church speaks the language of the End, so that we will know just how high the stakes are in the present."

Now we get to the text for this morning. Jesus wants us to know about the imminence of his return and he wants us know so that we will be living in watchful readiness for his return. He tells us there are signs that we can point to. No one knows when that time will be. Jesus is associating the time of his return with the impending destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

He says that the end days will be days of cosmic upheaval. There will be things going on in the cosmos that will capture

everyone's attention. We hear about natural disasters in places where natural disasters normally don't occur.

Just this past August, there was an earthquake measuring 5.8 on the Richter scale with the epicenter 5 miles from the little town of Mineral, Virginia. Schools in Prince George's County, Maryland where we came from were closed for the entire first week. Allyson said, "I'm glad we're in Missouri." I said, "What you don't realize is that we have the New Madrid fault and it's just a matter of time before we experience a big one that could be catastrophic. People from the west coast made fun of the reaction of people of people from Virginia to New York, but east coasters aren't used to earthquakes.

People in certain parts of the country are accustomed to dealing with tornadoes, but this past summer not long after a series of devastating tornadoes swept across Alabama and the south, one of the worst tornadoes in history flattened much of the city of Joplin. Earlier this fall, much of the northeast was paralyzed by a freak early snowstorm. A facebook friend in Massachusetts went about a week without electricity and when it did come back on, he said his street looked like a war zone with limbs that had broken off because the leaves were holding the snow and they couldn't handle the weight.

There's stuff like this happening all the time. Some people think that all of these unusual phenomena are a kind of sign that the end is near. I'll admit that there are a lot of strange phenomena happening around us, but they don't even yet rise to the level that the bible is talking about here. It's the kind of distress that there will be no mistaking. The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.

What would happen if the sun were darkened? It would greatly diminish life on this planet. Do you think if the moon refused to give its light, people would notice? Do you think there would be panic? Do you think that those things, coupled with stars falling from the sky and heavenly bodies being shaken, people would notice? Some folks would. Some folks would seek after God, but others would still refuse to believe.

I take these words as prophetic and poetic. They're not intended to be a play-by-play description or a chart that points out like a road map exactly what will be happening when. Jesus is using images that his listeners would understand and could relate to.

William Barclay points out:

But it is extremely interesting to note that the things Jesus prophesied were in fact happening. He prophesied wars and the dreaded Parthians were in fact pressing in on the Roman frontiers. He prophesied earthquakes and within forty years the Roman world was aghast at the earthquake which devastated Laodicea and by the eruption of Vesuvius which buried Pompeii in lava. He prophesied famines, and there was famine in Rome in the days of Claudius. It was in fact such a time of terror in the near future that when Tacitus began his histories he said that everything happening seemed to prove that the gods were seeking, not salvation, but vengeance on the Roman Empire.

Jesus then says, “At that time, people will see the son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. He will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heaven.” In a few verses, Jesus will utter those famous words, “No one knows the day or the hour.” We don’t know. The Son of Man himself doesn’t even know when it’s going to happen. It will be visible and there will be no doubt about what is happening when it does happen.

It’s interesting that Jesus talks about it this way. There will be cosmic upheaval and signs that will be unmistakable, but yet there will be a subtleness about it as well. Sometimes when I’m out in public and I get separated from someone, if I go a while without finding them, I may say to them, “I thought you had been raptured and I missed it.” There is that sense in which it will be sudden like a thief in the night.

In Matthew, Jesus says, “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.”

On the other hand, though, there will be those signs that are unmistakable if we’re just alert and watching. Maybe it’s that it does come suddenly enough to catch those unawares who aren’t watching, but those who are watching can be prepared for it. Jesus says, “This generation will not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

That’s where people may be tempted to say that Jesus misspoke or Jesus miscalculated. If he’s referring to the destruction of the Temple, he was dead on target. If he’s talking about his second coming happening in this generation, we’ve got some ‘splaining to do and it’s a bit more difficult to understand exactly how he meant it there. He could refer to all of the human race as this generation and it is an encouragement to those of us who may have given up or grown jaded or cynical about the Lord’s return and are thinking, “What’s the use?” He’s telling us not to give up, not to grow faint, that this plan that he has set in motion will come to fruition.

Then he says, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You don’t know when the time will come. It’s like a man going away: he leaves his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

This is a parable. As you know, when I teach parables there is always something in the parable that doesn’t make sense at first blush or seems out of proportion. As the mind puzzles over that, you find the point of the parable and you learn the lesson that Jesus is trying to teach. The owner goes away, he leaves the house and tells everyone to keep watch because they don’t know when he’s

coming back. You don't want to be caught unawares when he comes back.

That does seem a little bit strange to me. It's almost like there's some divine game of gotcha going on there. I'm going to wait and see if I can come back when you're not expecting. Sleep with one eye open because you just don't know and it won't be a pretty sight if you're not ready.

I don't have a massive estate and servants so it's no big deal when I go away, seldom ever more than a week at a time, give or take. I tend to leave explicit instructions with detailed plans and if we have someone bringing in our mail or taking care of our animals, to say, "We hope to be back by early afternoon on Saturday, here's my cell phone number if you need to reach me for anything before then. I should be able to check e-mail and to do facebook while I'm gone."

Of course, Jesus didn't have that technology. He's got something better.

Indwelling Christ Make you aware keep you steadfast. . . true advent

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