

“Everywhere are Signs”

Advent 2017 – part 1

Mark 13:24-37

HAPPY NEW YEAR! No, I haven't gotten my holidays mixed up. Today actually marks the first day in our church's liturgical year. When you look at the order of Christian holidays, you see that they are patterned after the life of Christ. The four weeks before Christmas are a time we call Advent, and they begin an annual cycle that will take us through Lent, Easter, Pentecost and several other important days. Advent is the start of a new year in the life of the church, and for many, Advent is a time of renewal in spirit as well. So, Happy New Year!

Will you pray with me? O Lord, on this day of new beginnings, we acknowledge you as the center of our lives and the center of our worship. We desire to grow more like Christ so that others may experience rejuvenation and hope, as we share your story. God, take these moments now, and make them come alive by your Holy Spirit. May the words of my mouth and meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14) Amen.

When was the last time you watched for falling stars? My family and I do this several times a year. Once we laid down some blankets in our back yard on a warm August evening and stared up at the heavens for hours.

There is a trick to watching for falling stars, though. Even during a meteor shower, you don't know when or where you will see them. You have to be alert; you must keep scanning and keep focused. It did not help me that on this particular evening, my dad's dog walked over me several times. One time, I

looked down at a star map on my smart phone and heard my family say, "Wow, that was a great one!" Yeah, I missed it.

Advent is kind of like waiting for stars to fall. Advent is a specific time of year when we remind ourselves that we are waiting and searching for signs of Jesus' return. The Bible tells us that not only did Jesus show up as a baby in Bethlehem, Jesus will also return as the victorious king at the end of time. In Mark 13:26, Jesus says, "At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." The phrase, the "Son of Man" was Jesus' most common way to describe himself in this gospel. (See Daniel 7:13)

We now live in a time where we are waiting for Christ to return, but we don't know exactly when that will be. I am sure you will all agree with me, most of the time, we don't like waiting. For instance, while shopping, or at the doctor, or when waiting for an important phone call, it is no fun at all.

But there are times when waiting is satisfying, for example, when you wait for a birthday present, or for a new restaurant to open. My personal favorite was waiting for my bride to come into the sanctuary at our wedding. In these cases, the anticipation of the sign we are awaiting is delightful. This is active waiting. For our wedding, we planned, decorated, dressed up, and otherwise prepared for the arrival of the bride.

Wondering about the future is nothing new. Every generation has wondered if they are living in the end times. Think about the popularity of fortune tellers, or even fortune cookies. We want to know the future to make plans for our jobs, our families, our wealth, and our retirement. A number of popular movies and songs deal with the end of the world as we know it. The

more we see devastation from natural disasters, pollution and wars, the more we wonder, is this really the end?

Allow me to teach you a seminary word. Eschatology. Say it with me. Eschatology. Eschatology is simply the study of end times. We need a healthy eschatology to drive the vision of our church and to make decisions in our lives. What you believe happens next affects your morals, your values, and especially your actions. If you do not believe Jesus will ever come back, there is very little incentive for you to be ready for him. On the other hand, if you think the end is near, your eschatology matters a great deal.

Earlier in Mark 13, Jesus tells us to not worry about the end. (v. 7 & 11) Our job is to wait and watch for the signs of his return. I will confess to you, eschatology is not my favorite church doctrine. I know the Bible teaches us Jesus will return, but I admit, Christ's second coming is difficult for me. Let me explain.

I just finished an early Christian history class in seminary. It is easy to talk about history because we know what happened. I can tell you stories about Emperor Constantine, the desert monks, Pope Innocent III, and so on, and how they impacted Christian theology over the centuries. I can tell you about Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, because they are history. However, I cannot take a class on "The Future of Christianity." There is no Marty McFly and Dr. Emmett Brown to take us forward 30 years in a DeLorean. No one knows when Jesus will come back. So why should we even talk about it?

I can give you at least one honest answer. Jesus taught about the future. If Jesus tells us about his return, it must be important. This is Jesus' message to us: if you pay attention, you will see the signs of his return everywhere. You won't miss it.

When we see trees in spring just starting to bud, we know that summer is coming. We can interpret the signs of the seasons. Jesus says his return is like that. An obvious sign is that the heavens will be shaken. In 1st century A.D., before modern astronomy, the sun, moon, and stars were understood as God’s companions, because “heaven” literally means the sky. So if God was among the stars, they would tell us of great events. For instance, the magi followed a star to the Christ child. And comets have been considered omens throughout history. When you see a falling star, you make a wish!

Now, when Jesus comes back, will the sun and moon literally go dark, and stars fall out of the sky? I don’t know for sure, but Jesus is saying that the signs of his return will be obvious. We just have to look for them.

No one really wants to live to see the end of the world. Generally, the end of the world is bad news. However, Jesus gives us good news. His words are eternal. His power is eternal. His blood, his grace, his forgiveness, his glory are forever. Jesus is more constant than the stars. If you go outside, you will see the Big Dipper in the northern sky all year long. I know where to find it and what it looks like. But astronomers tell us that if we could live long enough, say, hundreds of thousands of years, we would even see the constellations shift. By contrast, the Bible tells us in Hebrews 13:8 that Jesus never changes. That is a bold statement. That is good eschatological news!

Instead of being anxious about the end, we can be assured. Jesus says he will call all his people back to himself. (Mark 13:27) If you belong to Christ, if you have confessed him as Lord and Savior and seek to follow him, you won’t miss his return. In the first century A.D., people literally expected Jesus within months or even days. Things were bad for Christians in the Roman empire. They were

anxious. As that generation began to pass away, they wrote the gospels, leaving reassurance for future generations not to worry, Jesus will come back. Without their emphasis and zeal 2000 years ago, we would not have these words today.

The big question is, so what? What are we supposed to do? If 2000 years later, Christ has still not come back, are we supposed to launch a satellite system to watch the stars for signs of Christ? Seriously, doesn't NASA do that already? Can't we get digital images from the Hubble Space Telescope right on our smart phones? I even have two telescopes at home. I have never used them to look for Jesus! Clearly that is not what the Bible tells us to do.

We are not meant to speculate about the date of Jesus' return. For starters, Jesus himself says he doesn't know the date of his return. In Mark 13, we have an inward glimpse of the Trinity, the Son relating to the Father. The Father knows about the end; the Son does not. If Jesus trusts his heavenly Father with the end times, so should we.

So we need to wait. Ask any child; they hate waiting. Truth is, we all do. But this waiting is supposed to be active, not like waiting at the grocery or doctor. This is like waiting for the wedding to start. Active waiting.

Circle this verse: Mark 13:34 - "It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch." What does the Bible call us? Servants. Literally, slaves to Christ. That might sound bad, but Jesus has given us authority. We have assigned tasks. We are in charge. That's how we watch and wait for Jesus.

What are our tasks? They should be obvious, but maybe we need to repeat them again. Love God. Love people. Serve the least, the last, and the lost. Share the good news. Give generously. Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your

God. (Micah 6:8) These are the tasks we do as we actively wait for Jesus to return. Why? For the simple reason that when Christ comes back, we want him to be proud of us. We want to hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Being a disciple of Jesus means bringing him glory and honor, while we prepare our hearts for his return. When we actively wait for Jesus by loving others, it prepares them to meet Christ, too.

Yes, in the end days, there will be wars. There will be earthquakes. Truly, Mark 13 describes exactly what we see in our world today. And while many generations have believed they lived in the end times, I believe in the 21st century, we see more distress in the world than we have ever seen before. More war. More slavery. More nations rising and falling. Jesus said these things would happen. But this is no time to fear or be anxious. Instead, we must make every effort to do God's will here on earth, while at the same time, remembering that the Father has his perfect plan. We can be actively waiting, paying attention to signs that are everywhere. We do not need to panic. We can have a healthy, biblical eschatology.

If you knew the exact day of Jesus' return, would dramatically change your priorities? Imagine, if you knew you had 24 hours until Jesus came back to this earth for us. What would you do? What would be your final actions? We don't know his return, any more than we know exactly where and when to see a falling star. So to be ready for Jesus, we need to do those things now! Things like, forgiving, reconciling, loving others, and living for God.

Allow me to conclude with a personal example. I went deer hunting this year, and hunters know, waiting is part of the game. I finally got my deer, but I had to wait longer than I wanted. In fact, I missed my first three shots. I realized

afterwards, I wasn't ready for rifle season. I needed to practice. The same is true of the Christian walk. You can never practice your testimony too much, never love too often, never give too much, never work for peace and justice too often. These are the tasks allotted to us as we wait for Jesus. I pray you will make this Advent a time to prepare yourself spiritually. Every day is one day closer to Jesus' return. There has never been a better time, or a better reason, to prepare for ourselves to receive him.

Memory Verse: Mark 13:31

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Reflection Questions:

1. What is the longest wait you've ever had? Was it exciting or frustrating?
2. Do you think we live in the end times? What global events shape your answer?
3. Why do you think God has delayed for so long for the Son of Man to appear? What advantage is that to us? What disadvantage?
4. What do you do to prepare for Jesus? Have you trusted him to save you? Do you love him and live for him?