

"Wait for the Lord"
March 15, 2020 (Third Lent)
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Mark 13:24-37

[Jesus said:]

"But 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."

Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord. Keep watch, take heart.

Every time I want to get a present for a friend of mine – say, for their birthday or some other special occasion – I always find myself in a bind. Because, you see, I want to get my friend *the perfect present*. But what is that perfect present? It alludes me. A book? A piece of art? Something homemade? Should I give my friend something she would *like*, or should I go more for something she *needs*? I'm never sure, and I feel like I never get it quite right.

Then again, maybe I shouldn't give gifts at all. Maybe this whole gift-giving thing is overrated. When I was a kid, anything I could not play with was a pretty awful gift, as far as I was concerned. I remember some of my early birthday parties, and even some early Christmases: tearing open my gifts with great fervor, only to discover a new sweater or a pair of socks, or jeans that had gone out of style a year ago. I would heave a dramatic sigh, roll my eyes toward the heavens and say, without an *ounce* of sincerity, "Thank you."

I think Jesus is also trying to give a gift this morning, but I'm not sure how well this one is going over either. Today, right in the middle of our nice church service, Jesus comes in, and crashes our party. Jesus shows up with a brightly wrapped gift that I don't think any of us really want.

What did we just hear from the Gospel of Mark? Bible scholars call it *Apocalyptic*, a final judgment of all things and the ultimate victory of God. Here it is, a nice Sunday morning, and Jesus gives us suffering and judgment. Today Jesus gives us a darkened sun and a light-less moon, stars driven off their courses, and the Son of Man riding on the clouds with great power and glory. Jesus, sweet Jesus, Jesus, Jesus meek and mild, is giving us more than we ever wanted here. Any chance we can just have the nice stuff, the love-God-and-neighbor kind of stuff? Any chance we can give back the scary accessories?

You know, the gifts we *don't* want say a lot about who we are and what we value. And the gift I most definitely do not want, no matter my age, is the one that Jesus gives me this morning: the shaking of the heavens, the world turning upside down, the judgment of all things. I do not want that. That was not even on my list.

The gifts we *don't* want say a lot about who we are and what we value. Jesus will shake the heavens, but I like things quiet and stable. Jesus promises to darken the sun and turn off the moon, but I think that sounds a little heavy-handed. Jesus offers to change everything, to turn the world upside down, but I'm pretty comfortable with the world as it is.

Did you ever notice how, sometimes, the gift you don't want is exactly the gift you need? Did your spouse get you a watch for your birthday? That may feel like a rip-off now, but you know, being on time is actually pretty great. Did your mom buy you a new vacuum cleaner at Christmas time? You might have rolled your eyes on Christmas morning, but who knows? Maybe spring cleaning is in order after all. When someone who loves me, someone I trust, gives me a gift I don't want, maybe I should stop and take a second look. Maybe Mom knows something I don't. Maybe my spouse understands me better than I understand myself. Maybe this gift will turn out to be the one thing I need the most.

What does Jesus want to give us this morning? *The hope that things will change*. Today, Jesus announces that he intends to make some radical adjustments to our world, that he means to disrupt the status quo, that he's planning on staging an all-out revolution. And maybe we need to hear that. Maybe we need to hear it over and over, again and again, because we seem so quick to forget it. We are so quick to forget that the baby born in a manger a few months ago is the very same one who's going to turn the whole world upside down.

Is the language of Mark's Gospel jarring? Unsettling? Unpleasant? Most definitely. But so is the blare of the alarm clock by your bed. Maybe we have slept for too long. Maybe we aren't yearning for a new heavens and a new earth because we think we are doing okay with the ones we have right now. Maybe we've gone numb to all the things that are wrong in our world: all the suffering, all the injustice, all the things

that wound the heart of God. Maybe our lives are too comfortable, too casual, too at ease. Maybe Jesus needs to shake us, to wake us, to get us out of beds and on to the work of praying and trusting and watching for all the things that God is yet to do.

Maybe that's the one thing – the one gift – we need the most.

When I was a kid, when I tore open my birthday and Christmas presents with such vehemence, only to be disappointed when it turned out to be a pair of loser jeans, I wonder how my parents felt. Were they sad that I rolled my eyes and sighed with exasperation? Or... did they smile to themselves and shake their heads because kids will be kids? Did they know that I would outgrow my ingratitude, that I would one day see the value in their gift?

Jesus talks about waiting here in Mark's gospel; but maybe the waiting's not only for us to do. Maybe *God* is waiting too. Maybe God is waiting and wondering just how much longer we are going to sleep. Maybe God is waiting for us to wake up and realize that this world is not so great after all; that it could stand to be turned upside down. Maybe God is waiting for the day when we will finally want *everything* that Jesus is giving us, the shaking of the heavens, the shaking of the status quo, the disruption, the discomfort, and all.

Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord. Keep watch, take heart.
Thanks be to God.