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Sermon

The Gospel of Faith in an Age of Anxiety

Mark 13:1-8

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Covid! Poland! Kiribati! Earthquakes! Global warming! Images and words that have been thrust at us each night on the News. It seems that unremitting disaster and danger is all around us. Just one of these would be enough for concern, but together they can be downright frightening. So often in response goes up the cry, "What is the Government doing about this?" as if the Government can solve all our problems. They can't, and I don't mean by this the current political party that is in power. No Government of any party can.

So how do we live in a world like this?

Advent gives us the proper response to all of this.

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, **do not be alarmed**; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famine. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (Mark 13:7,8.)

The context of this saying is very important. Jesus is talking with His disciples about the destruction of the Temple. He clearly foretold that unless the Jewish authorities changed their ways they were heading for disaster of unimaginable proportions. The very center of Jewish life and culture was to be destroyed. The building that was the sign and symbol of God's presence was to be annihilated. This disaster would say loud and clear that God was no longer centered in Jerusalem.

If that was all that the passage meant, then it has little relevance for us. It is a good reminder that if we, the people of God, do not walk in obedience to Him the same thing could happen to us. None of us is indispensable. God will ensure that His purposes and plans for the world are completed; with or without us.

But this and other passages like it have long been seen in the Church as a description of the events that led up to the Second Coming of Our Lord. And as such it has three of the most important truths that the Bible has to teach us. 1. God is in charge 2. We have a job to do under God's direction. 3. We will always be people of hope and people of praise. There will always be joy at the heart of our lives even in the darkest times.

Let me take you through each of those but not in that order.

2. We have a job to do under God's direction. As we come face to face with the evils of this world we can easily be overwhelmed. The size of the problems we all face are at least daunting if not downright terrifying. What can I possibly do that will make a difference? As we face these enormous issues, we do well to keep in mind the "Serenity prayer" that is used by Alcoholics Anonymous:

God, grant us the serenity
To accept the things we cannot change,
The courage to change the things we can
And the wisdom to know the difference.

I cannot do everything. I cannot do much. But I can do **SOMETHING**. There was a time when certain Countries made themselves Nuclear Free Zones. NZ was one of them. I remember the debates at our Synod over the issue. There were bumper stickers that declared that this is a Nuclear Free Zone. So, I got one and place it on my car for all to see. Now I knew that if someone wanted to detonate a nuclear weapon next door to me, I was safe in my nuclear clear zone.

Ridiculous of course! But it was something I could do that declared my abhorrence of nuclear weapons.

I feel a similar thing about climate change. It is an enormous problem. If India and China don't come on board then all of the changes that we can make as a Nation let alone me as an individual will not solve the problem. To which we can answer, "Let's do nothing. It's not going to make any difference anyway." OR we can take responsibility for what we CAN do. Others will have to do what I can't. I will do all I can to support them. I can't negotiate with China the United States and India. I can plant a tree and I can pray.

1. That last brings me to the greatest antidote to fear and depression in the midst of these huge issues. The whole Bible from cover to cover makes the stunning claim that God is Lord of this world. God has a purpose and God has a plan. That plan is being worked out and it will come to completion. God's aim is that it will come to completion WITH us. If we refuse or get in the way, it will make no difference to the completion of that plan. All that we will discover is that we have picked the wrong side and will suffer the consequences.

This means that I can hear of "wars and rumors of wars", and I will be able to act with confidence because God is in charge. That is the great message of Advent. Jesus is Lord. He does have the whole world in His hands. "God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year." That is what keeps me from despair. That is what gives me hope as I work against seemingly impossible odds.

Let me say it loud and clear:

HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT IN CHARGE OF THE ULTIMATE DESTINY OF THIS WORLD.

Please let's us not get ourselves into the foolish position of putting Science and our Faith in opposition to one another. Science and Faith NEED each other. I wish I could find the quote made by an eminent climate change scientist. He said something like, I thought that all I had to do was tell people the truth about what we are doing to the planet, and everyone would join me in changing our ways. But I failed to take into account the selfishness of people.

We of course know why. Human sin is destructive. It is destructive of individual lives, can destroy a family a Nation or the world, **AND SCIENCE IS POWERLESS AGAINST IT** as this man saw. Science is a powerful tool for good in the hands of good people. It is utterly destructive in the hands of evil people.

I have often told you of the two most marvelous words in the Bible. They are, BUT GOD. But God can change human lives. But God is in charge of this world. This is God's world, and He has a plan to save it. Please note: it is a plan to save **the world** as well as you me and anyone else who will say yes to Him. God saw the sin of humanity and its effect on the world. But God saw and acted. Science has no power to do that. God can. God has.

If you take nothing else from this sermon, take those two words; but God.

3. That brings me to the last of my points. Teilhard de Chardon said, "Joy is the infallible sign of the Kingdom of God." Joy is in short supply when we are faced with the problems of this world. Confidence in God who loves His world and has acted to save it will put a smile on our face and an unshakeable Joy in our hearts. It is a fruit of the Spirit of God. We are people of praise. We are people of thanksgiving.

I invite you to just stop for one moment each day and think of the number of things for which you are thankful. Lately I have been thinking of the privilege of having water so readily available. Do you remember hearing Jed play for us in one of our services and Elisabeth and Lucas who taught us how to encourage rather than

discourage with our words and actions? What about little tinies as they toddle around. Do they bring a smile to your face? What about a glorious day? How about delighting in the beauty of NZ?

Then how about this one, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him - God has revealed to us by His Spirit.”

No human being could possibly have dreamed up the idea that the only way to save the world is to die for it. No human being could have dreamt up the idea that God would become human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God become a human being!? Don't be ridiculous! And what about the Trinity? Could there be anything more likely to cause howls of derision.

The whole Gospel story is hard to get your head around. Yet these things are the truths that both Testaments point to. More importantly for us God has by His grace revealed them to us. If you know these truths it is because God, the Holy Spirit revealed them to you.

And if they are true, (and I know they are!) it is no wonder that we go around with a smile on our face even when things are at their darkest. We will still sing songs of praise even when our hearts are breaking. Joy is a fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit. It comes straight after Love in St Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5: 22.

But think ahead even further. What will life in the presence of the Trinity be like? One thing we can guarantee is that there will be no long faces there. There will be laughter and celebration and praise and glory. C S Lewis says “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.” Whatever is in store for us we will find it very hard to imagine it even. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try! Begin now. Imagine the greatest delight you can think of. Now multiply it by ten, or twenty, or even one hundred. That is what life with the Trinity could be like. No wonder we smile a lot.

This advent let us prepare for both the celebration of our Lord's first coming and the expectation of His return with joyful hearts at the wonder of all that God has done. You could begin by writing a list of all the things you are thankful for. And don't forget BUT GOD!