

Sermon on Psalm 80:1-7,17-19 and Mark 13:24-37
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
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I don't know if you know it or not, but this is the first day of a new year. Our years are marked in many ways, by school calendars and monthly calendars, fiscal years and changing of the seasons. But this is the first day of the church year. And our year begins in the dark. From the middle of the summer the days get shorter and shorter as the earth spins on its axis away from the sun. Then, we change the time for daylight savings time, and it gets darker sooner...so much so that many of us go to work or school in the dark and get home after the sun has gone down. And the earth continues its movement away from the sun until, somewhere between December 20th and 23rd each year, we have the longest night of the year, our most prolonged plunge into darkness.

So, maybe the church calendar itself has something to teach us. Out of the darkness, light will come; the baby will be born in Bethlehem. The light will dawn and spread its light to the whole world.

Our passage today in Mark reflects the same truth. Jesus is with four of his disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew. They are sitting on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem looking out over the temple. Jesus has just told them that the temple will be destroyed, will come tumbling down into rubble and dust. And, they want to know when. They want to be prepared. That is when Jesus breaks into this passage of darkness, lostness, and despair. He describes a scene when loved ones betray each other, when false prophets lure people away, when the very cosmos is shattered into darkness.

Mark writes these words down years later as these things are coming to fruition. The historian Josephus tells us that Jerusalem was under siege from the Roman army. People starved, ate their babies to stay alive, fought each other for scraps of spoiled food. Jews killed other Jews. False prophets were trying to gain a following. And then, in the year 70, the

adopted son of the Roman Emperor rode triumphantly into Jerusalem, burnt the Temple, destroyed what was left of the city, and crucified thousands of Jews (history from *Mark for Everyone*, Tom Wright, 182-183).

Maybe in the midst of it all, the Jews were crying out Psalm 80. “How long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of Hosts; let your face shine that we might be saved.”

Was this the end of the world? Well it was certainly the end of their world. It was the end of an age, the end of a way of the only way of life that they knew. It must have seemed as though the stars had been flung out of the sky and a blanket thrown over the sun and moon.

It could be that these words of Jesus were meant not for the ultimate fear factor, but for comfort. Could it have been a reminder that to enter into the new life Jesus promised, the old life must pass away? Could Jesus have been saying that instead of feeling God has utterly abandoned them in this end of the world, God is actually very present? God is always about making all things new, even in the midst of the destruction of the end of the world. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”, Jesus says (Mark 13:31).

We have all had times in our lives when we were sure that the world was coming to an end, that all the stars had fallen over the horizon, never to be seen again, that the sun would never shine again. It could have been when she came and said, “The marriage is over. I’m leaving.” or when your child died. It could have been in the jungles of Vietnam as bombs dropped around you or in a village in Guatemala where the ravages of war were all too evident. It could have been when you heard the diagnosis or when the layer of deep depression blotted out the last bit of light. It could have been when the plane crashed into the World Trade Center or when the shots rang out in dorm rooms, classrooms, hotels or subways. So much darkness. So much pain.

But God says, “Wait. I am with you, even to the end of the age.”

And so, what are we to do? We are to watch. It's not a passive watching. The doorkeeper can't fall asleep at the door. When the master leaves, the servants can't shirk their duties. We are to be about living into the new hope of the bud shooting out of the fig tree. We are to be looking for the places where new life is springing forth. Even in the darkness, we have seen Jesus come—again and again—in the face of friend or stranger, in a card or a casserole, in a worship service or on the street corner—in acts of love that penetrate the darkness.

I suppose we could sit around calculating exactly the day and the hour when Jesus will be arriving from the clouds in all his glory. But Jesus says that he doesn't even know when that time will be.

Or we could huddle down in the house with gallons of bottled water and canned food to last us into the next century with the heavy furniture pushed up against the door. But, somehow, that doesn't fit into God's way either.

We know that the end of the world can come at any moment, blindsiding us with a new diagnosis, a death, another report of people killed in Iraq or Afghanistan or Mumbai or Chicago. In those moments, we hold one another close and try, with our love, to point to the one coming in the clouds with great power and glory.

And so we live and learn from Jesus' words about the fig tree. And, we stand together, supporting one another, looking for the new shoots of life. We nurture that life for we know that it comes from God. In the darkness...at dusk, at midnight, at three in the morning, we live in anticipation of the light coming to make all things new, and we work toward that day. We live, through the grace of Jesus Christ, to bring new shoots of life into the world. We keep awake. And we say, Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

