

Mark 13: 32-37

‘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.’

One of the scariest things about all of this pandemic stuff, at least for me, is the uncertainty. We really don’t know when it will be safe to meet together in person. While I absolutely believe that things will get back to normal, we don’t know when that will be. If they’re honest, neither does anybody else.

In our Scripture reading this morning, Jesus has just told his disciples that the world as they know it is going to end. The Temple will be destroyed, and the Hebrew people will be scattered around the Roman world in what’s called the Diaspora. Then, some time after that, the Second Coming will happen, and people will get to see a real end of the world.¹

But nobody knows when that’s going to be.

We’ve all heard people predict the end of the world. You may remember when a radio evangelist named Harold Camping announced that the Rapture would happen on May 21, 2011. His followers sold their belongings and liquidated pensions to advertise that the end was near. It didn’t happen.

¹ Mark 13:1-31.

The religious group known as the Jehovah's Witnesses has gone through several predictions of the end of the world. It was supposed to end with the Second Coming in 1878, 1881, 1914, 1918, 1925, and 1975, among other times.²

I find these stories tragic, because, while at least some of these people are, no doubt, sincere, they are wrong. Jesus said that he didn't know when it would be, and that nobody else did, either. That means that anyone who says they know, is contradicting what Jesus said, just like someone who said that loving your neighbor isn't important. Anyone who tells you that they've figured out when the Second Coming will be, based on the Bible or anything else, is wrong.

Reading this now, in the midst of a pandemic, there are two things that come to mind.

First, our economy may be severely handicapped right now by all the restrictions to keep people alive, and people are still dying from the coronavirus. That's not news: that's what you hear and see every day.

But God's plans are not thwarted.

God did not send this virus to punish people. God has done the whole "cleanse the world with a blunt instrument" thing. You may remember, it was called the Great Flood, with Noah and the Ark. It didn't work. Evil remained in the world.

God did not send this pandemic, but God can work in the midst of it.

God did not send this pandemic, but God can use it.

God did not send this pandemic, but it is not powerful enough to mess up God's plans. Not God's plans for you, and not God's plans for the world.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watch_Tower_Society_unfulfilled_predictions

Second, no matter what we endure, there is hope ahead. We should watch for it.

Even in the midst of the pandemic, there are opportunities to show love for our neighbors.

Some of the best examples right now are hard to hear, because they're not what we want to hear. They're not what I want to be saying, either. But they're the truth.

Right now, we show love by distancing ourselves, to avoid transmitting the virus. We look at the data, we listen to the experts, and we don't schedule gatherings until it's safe.

Right now, we show love when those who are healthy help others. Whether it's grabbing some groceries when you're getting your own, or doing a run to the pharmacist so that someone doesn't have to go out who really shouldn't, that is love in action.

Right now, we show love when those who could use the help accept it, in order to avoid larger problems developing. Letting someone else help you, so that you don't take a chance on needing medical help, is love in action. Love for your neighbor who gets to help you, and love for your neighbors who need the limited medical resources.

And we watch.

We watch for the end of this pandemic. But don't obsess over it.

I promise, I want to restart in-person worship as much as you do, and I'll be asking Session to re-start it as soon as the experts say it's safe. The people who are in charge of everything from movie theaters to Buckeye football want to return to normal, too, and they will as soon as it's safe.

We watch for God at work in the world. God is with us in the midst of pandemic, just as God was with Christians in the midst of the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, and God was with Christians in the midst of the plague.

We can see God at work in our medical workers, doing amazing work to save as many people's lives as possible.

We can see God at work in the fact that our infrastructure, our roads and our national trade system, are still functioning. We may have to be careful when we go to the grocery store, but, thank God, there is food there.

We can see God at work in a million small gestures of kindness and love that are happening every day, even in the middle of all this.

This pandemic will come to an end. Our economy and lives will recover. Because truly I tell you, God is with us.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil; for you are with me;

your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

So let us continue to love God and love our neighbors.

Even now.

Amen.