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First Presbyterian Church  
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Watch

Mark 13:24-37

Big football game this weekend. The Iron Bowl, right? I didn’t go – did any of you? If anyone wants to go together next year, let me know. I’d like to go, and carry this sign:

[The End Is Near]

Who’s coming with me? Nobody? What, does this make you uncomfortable? Are we not that kind of church? The APNC didn’t have that conversation with me during the interviews.

The End is near – you know, I’m not comfortable with this sign either. I didn’t read the Left Behind books, I didn’t follow the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012, I’m not looking for signs of the end times. But the passage this morning makes it sound like maybe we should: the sky darkened, stars falling, the son of Man coming in glory… heaven and earth passing away!

The passage – Mark’s “Little Apocalypse” it’s called – is not exactly what we expect to hear on the first Sunday in Advent. This is the season in which we prepare to welcome Christ into the world! The Thanksgiving dishes are done and the pumpkin pie is long gone. The tree is decorated! I’m ready for some Bing Crosby and eggnog, angels and a baby in the manger. If we are expecting to hear prophesy, it’s about wolves dwelling with lambs, not dark, apocalyptic visions. We Presbyterians don’t talk much about the end times as a general rule. There’s not a chapter on the apocalypse in our Book of Order. Besides, the end of the world as we know it is not what we want to hear right now, is it? How about a little hope to get us through the week?

The headlines are difficult enough without apocalyptic visions. There are protests and riots in Ferguson. Women can’t walk across college campuses without being afraid. With rape, the repression of black America, black Friday greed, and the black flag of ISIS in the news, the last thing we need to hear at church is the heavens shaking and and stars falling from the sky.

Then again... that might be exactly what we need to hear. Let me explain.

Apocalyptic prophesies were intended to bring hope to desperate people. The gospel passage and the section of Isaiah that inspired our call to worship both fit into this category. And the psalm’s lament is closely connected as well. It was a revelation to me to learn about the apocalyptic worldview that dominated Jewish communities around the time of Jesus’s birth. It’s evident in the book of Daniel, Revelation, and in many other places in the old and new testaments. Communities of the faithful were convinced that the world would end in their lifetimes with a battle between good and evil. Prophets predicted God’s intervention to put an end to suffering and political oppression – and even believed such things were necessary precursors to the end times. I don’t believe that is true, but I can certainly understand how those
communities must have felt. And it helps to understand the context in which this passage was written.

The prophet Isaiah cried out to God on behalf of his people. How long, O God, must we suffer? He cries, “tear open the heavens and come down, God, put an end to this! Save us!”

How long, Isaiah’s people wondered, must we live in exile?

How long must we endure the iron rule of Babylon?

How long will you remain silent in the face of our suffering, God?

Like Isaiah, Mark was writing to a desperate community. Israel was part of the Roman empire, and Jews were a persecuted minority. When the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 70 CE, it was devastating — the temple was the sign of God’s presence among them. “How long must we live without God’s presence, as second-class citizens under Roman rule? how long must we suffer?”

And people across the US, and Michael Brown’s community are saying the same thing today:

How long, God? How long will you ignore our prayers? How long until our justice system is truly just? How long must we suffer the scourge of racism, a militarized police, and mass imprisonment?

How long must we endure substandard schools, suspensions, and segregation?

How long must we wait for you to come to us? How long?

O God, tear open the heavens and come down here to make things right! Shine your face that we might be saved!

Why apocalypse now? Why at the beginning of Advent? Advent begins with lament and repentance. Starting with an apocalypse gives us a chance to name the pain of the community, and to receive the promise of transformation: A new heaven and a new earth. Because what is is so broken, only God can fix it. But that doesn’t let us off the hook.

These short, cold days of winter are when we prepare ourselves to welcome and embrace God’s presence in the world. There are signs of desolation all around – in headlines, on our streets, in our hearts. There are plenty of reasons to feel hopeless. But – here is the good news: God DID tear open the heavens and come to us. God chose to enter this world in the person of Jesus. God became embodied to show us that bodies matter, that we matter. In Christ, God shows us the power of selflessness and service. And in this time of year, we don’t just look back to the birth of Jesus. We look forward to the time when God’s plan for justice and peace is realized – as we do when we pray, ‘your Kingdom Come,’ in the Lord’s prayer each week.

Mark’s Jesus seeks to reassure his disciples that justice is coming. Their job is to be vigilant – faithful – even in the face of desolation. Even when they feel hopeless. Be alert, keep awake he tells them. No one knows when or how, but God is hard at work, transforming this broken old world into something new. Stay true to the path and work of discipleship, Jesus says,
and watch closely for what God is doing. Be on the watch for the master’s return, which could happen at any time. LIVE AS IF THE END IS NEAR, Expect transformation.

Do we expect transformation?

Wrestling with what to say on this first Sunday of Advent in the wake of the events in Ferguson, I read everything I could get my hands on. I came across an op-ed in the New York Times written by Michelle Alexander¹. Michelle is a professor and civil rights lawyer, and the author of The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness. In the op-ed, she writes about telling her ten year-old son about the Grand Jury’s decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for shooting Michael Brown. Her son is worried, and afraid. He wants her to tell him he has nothing to worry about, that nothing like this could ever happen to him. And so, she says, she lies to him. Even though she spends her days speaking about racism in our criminal justice system, she can not tell him the truth. Cheeks flushed, she is embarrassed and angry that she can’t tell him that he does have reason to worry - young black men are 21 times more likely than white men to be shot by police. She goes on to explain that the officer who did this will not go to trial, and her son gets angry, enraged at the injustice. She tells him that she is angry, too, and so are people in Ferguson. Even more than feeling angry, though, she is proud. Proud of the young activists who are standing up against what happened, braving tear gas while holding signs that proclaim, “Black Lives Matter.” Proud of those who are speaking up to say “that we should be able to live in a world where we trust the police and where all people… no matter what their color or where they came from, are treated with dignity, care, compassion and concern… Who know that the tools of war, violence and revenge will never build a nation of justice.”² Proud that there are people willing to risk their lives to ensure that children can live in a better world.

Our children should not have to inherit a criminal justice system that is punitive instead of restorative, that only brings justice for some and not all. We should not have to have this conversation with our families at all. It’s understandable that sometimes, it seems easier not to say anything at all. Better not to offend. Put on the Bing Crosby and hope for a Merry Christmas. But when we avoid these conversations, we are being resigned to the world as it is. We are just perpetuating the problem. We are not staying awake to see where God might show up in the midst of the pain and the mess, calling us to faithful discipleship. So we may miss the opportunity to be agents of God’s grace, peace, and love in a hurting world.

I was moved by Michelle’s conversation with her son, because it made me long for a time when she could be truthful with him – that the police will act to protect all people, because all lives are precious. It made me hope for a generation that will not know the racism that we are bound by. It compelled me to be aware of my own complicity as a white woman in the South who has not done enough to name or overcome racism in my church or community.

The good news is this: God entered this world and redeemed it in Christ. That work is done, and it is ongoing. We are called to be alert. To keep awake. To look for the ways that God is showing up and continually working for healing and redemption in broken and painful places in our lives and communities. And to accept the invitation to be co-creators with God,

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² Ibid.
actively pursuing the Spirit’s movement for liberation and justice. Because God promises that the End of the world as we know it is Near. The end of injustice, the end of racism, the end of fear. I believe we’re called to be part of that ending, to dismantle sinful systems alongside the Spirit. Expect transformation!

After all, God can turn a baby into a savior for humankind. Wield power through powerlessness. Turn death into life.

So keep awake. Don’t be resigned to the world as it is. Since we know neither the day nor the hour, expect transformation every day. Look for it!

Plant a tree. Light candles in the darkness. Hold fast to hope. Spend time building relationship with someone who is different from you. Learn about their experience. See if it changes how you see the world. Read the New Jim Crow. Have difficult conversations. Watch and wait, actively, with anticipation, ready for the new thing God is doing in the world. Though the sun may be darkened and the heavens may shake, don’t be disheartened. Work for transformation. Pray Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.