

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Mark 13:24-37

Sermon Title: "Ready for What May Come" (Traveling through Mark's Gospel)

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Every generation has had doomsayers predicting the end of the world. Every 20 or so years, somebody comes forward, saying he knows exactly when the world will end.

Last year it was Harold Camping saying he knew when the world would end on two different occasions. Scientists have thought the Mayan calendars have predicted accurately the end of time. Years ago even Billy Graham had predicted on the radio that Christ would return within five years of his broadcast. My father-in-law heard this particular radio show, and believed that if Billy Graham said it, it must be true. So what he did was use the meager savings he had put aside for college on his girlfriend and his car. He used almost all his money on both of them, until one day he realized that Billy Graham could be wrong. Who knows when Christ will come back? Sadly, he didn't have much money for college, although he still applied. There was a cartoon of a raggedy man, walking up and down a city sidewalk, carrying a sign saying, "Don't worry, you still have lots of time." Two businessmen

approach the man with the sign, and the one businessman says, “OK, now I’m worried.”¹ Every 20 or so years, somebody will come forward with information about the end of time.

Jesus speaks about the end of time. He is considering the moment, in which he will have to face the chief priests and be sentenced to die on a cross. As he talks about his own death, he also wants to talk about the end of all things. The day is called the Day of the Lord, which is a topic familiar to the disciples and other Jewish people.

Nowadays, when people talk about end of the world stuff, they freak out. They panic. They make rash decisions like creating bomb shelters that will repel any zombie invasion, as though that could ever happen. But this was not a scary topic for the people of Israel during Jesus’ time. They did not worry over nuclear war or zombies or vampires or anything else. In fact, according to one Bible scholar, the Jews looked forward to the Day of the Lord.² They believed themselves to be the chosen people of God, and thus no harm would ever befall them. They trusted that God would, some day, enter human history, take it over, and win the day for all of God’s people.

¹ From Wiley Miller’s *Non Sequitur*, 11-30-11.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, cf. 318.

Oppression, disease, hunger, and death would be things of the past, things wiped away and forgotten.

Of course, there would be a cosmological upheaval to start it all off. If sin and evil are going to be eradicated, they are going to put up a good fight first. Jesus mentions tribulation in Mark 13. He mentions the sun darkening and the moon turning black. Stars will fall from the sky and the powers of heaven will be shaken. The prophet Joel mentions these things in the second chapter of his book. Daniel also offers predictions of the end times at the end of his book. Hell is going to put up a good fight before Heaven prevails. The Jews are familiar with these predictions, and as God's chosen people they are confident that God will take them through hell and win the day.

Jesus brings up the subject not to scare the living daylight out of people. He is looking to his own death, and he wants his disciples to understand that he is going to die. At first it will appear to be like a small cosmological upheaval. It will seem as though Hell is winning. But Jesus will pass through death and will arrive to life. He will do this for us, so that we who believe will not experience eternal death. We who are confident in the Lord, who believe that he will see us through everything,... we will end up on the other side, alive and well. So Jesus talks about these things not

to panic us but to prepare us. He wants us to be aware and be ready.

“Take your lesson from the fig tree,” Jesus says. Figs are a part of a Middle Easterner’s diet. Figs are like apples and oranges to us. The trees themselves go through a cycle of growing branches and growing leaves, and then growing the fruit to the point that they are ripe to pluck. It is easy to approach any fig tree and watch the changes it goes through. And yet, it is difficult to determine what are the fig trees in our lives that we must observe, in order to know the Day of the Lord is coming.

At the time Jesus talked about fig trees, he had already predicted the destruction of God’s temple in Jerusalem in the first part of Mark 13. The temple was destroyed in 70AD, and there has not been once like it since. But we live in a post-temple world. What are the signs that we must watch out for to determine when Christ is coming back? What are the fig trees for us?

We can say this for a start: the fig trees are not to be found in the media. Too many times the TV news networks want to scare us about something the President is doing, or something Congress is doing, and if they get away with it, Armageddon will fall. We

will be destroyed. When the news networks say this, they want to scare us to death. Then they want us to react by hating the other side, blaming others for our problems. That is their main goal. Christ has nothing to do with their ploys. The Day of the Lord has all to do with hope and joy for good times that lie ahead. When we start hearing this nonsense on TV, do not believe it. We will find no fig trees there.

And we will find no fig trees, when people say they know exactly when time will stop. We should already know this, but it must be repeated: nobody knows when the end of time will occur. God doesn't want us to know when that time will come, I believe, for two reasons. If we know the time is coming, and it is within our own time here on earth, then we would live in fear, not joy. We could be in a constant panic, not going about normally, doing the things Christ calls us to do. And second, if we knew, and it is *not* within our own time, we would become lazy. We would say, "Bah, the end of time isn't coming for awhile, so I can just sit back and do whatever I want." Jesus gives us no date, no year, no nothing. Nobody knows the time because God wants us in the present moment, doing what we can now for God's glory.

So where might we find the fig trees that will give us some idea of the future? I personally think that the

fig trees are right here, right within us. I think the signs of the times are right within our brains, right within our hearts. These fig trees are not pointing us to an end for all humanity. They are pointing to our own end someday.

All of us will die. We will not last forever on this earth. I hate saying that, because it isn't a fun thing to think about. We will have an end, and yet God wants us to know that our end here is not a final end. Our personal end of time will come at some point, and so God wants us to be ready for it. God wants us to be prepared even now for that time, so we do not miss it.

We take a look at Mark 13:32, and Jesus is talking about the end of all time and space for the universe. But look again at Mark 13:32, and read it this way: "But about that day or hour [when we die, we do not know], neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware [of that day when you will die]. Keep alert [and pray], for you do not know when [your] time will come." We do not know when the end of the world will be, but we can be absolutely sure of this: we do know that the world will end for us sooner or later. We know that we will shed this mortal coil, as Shakespeare put it once, and will come face to face with God in the glory of his heaven. Will we be ready

for that time? Will we have been watching and praying, realizing that it could come at any moment?

Even as we think of our own demise, Christ does not want us to panic. He does not want us to be scare about death. If we are children of God, then we can rest assured that God chooses life for us. God wants to give life. God sees us through bad and good, and allows us to come out of anything. We should think as the Jews once did, that God is our Father and no harm will befall us.

We go to the parable about the master entrusting the house to his servants. Jesus says at the end of our Scripture passage today that a man plans a trip to some far-off country, and so he needs to give authority to his servants to take care of the bills, the cleaning, the yard work, etc, etc. When the man goes away, what do the servants do? Do they turn on the TV, open a bag of potato chips, put their feet up on the coffee table, and watch The View or The Drs all day? No, they do their work. They clean the house and mow the grass and pay the bills – they do it all as though the master is still at home. They take a break now and then, but they continue with the work entrusted to them, not just because the master told them to work but mainly because they love their master. They

want to please their master, and keep his things neat and tidy as though it was their own.

Jesus also says in the parable that the master entrusts the doorman to keep watch for his return. What does the doorman do? Sit around and nap all day? Go off and do errands, believing the master won't come back soon? No, he does the work he was appointed to do. He acts as though the master is still at home, and he guards the house because of his love for the master.

John Waller is a Christian musician who wrote a song called "While I'm Waiting." He says he is waiting on the Lord. He is hopeful as he waits. It might be painful to wait for the Lord, but he will be patient as he waits. And then he says while he is waiting, he will take every step of life in obedience. He will serve. He will worship. In essence, John Waller presents a paradox. We think of waiting as sitting and doing nothing while looking forward to something happening. Not in John Waller's song, and not in Jesus' parable. Waiting is not passive in the Christian life; it is aggressive. Waiting means to serve, to worship, to love, to forgive, to instill hope, to give light, to be joyfully active. These are all action verbs, because waiting means action. If we want to be ready for the coming of the Lord, then be active. Grow in

faith. Grow in worship. Grow in love and service. Move forward. Make ourselves available for service, and we go out there and serve. Like Larry the Cable Guy says, “Git ‘er done!”

Doing as the servants of the master’s house did is the best way to be prepared for the Lord’s Day. We don’t know when the Day of the Lord will be. Jesus was very ambiguous about it, and so are all the other Scripture passages that deal with end times stuff. Jesus spoke to his disciples about preparedness. Not about the actual day coming – do not waste time worry about that – but about being ready every day, whether it comes in their lifetimes or not.

We know that One Day is going to be our day, our personal day when we die and move on to heaven. So while we have breath, we move. While we can still do, we do all for the Lord. Every day is his day, and we rejoice and be glad in it.

