November 30, 2014

Mark 13:24-37

Let Heaven and Nature Sing: Earth

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 13:24-37 (New Revised Standard Version)

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven,  and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “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.”

How many people decorated for Christmas this Thanksgiving holiday? I did at my house and Paul Kibby and Gary Travelstead did at the church. Doesn’t it look amazing? I love Christmas trees and evergreen. I love the way it smells and the way it makes me feel. It makes me happy. But, we aren’t quite ready to raise our Christmas Eve candles and sing Joy to the World yet. We have some waiting to do before we can celebrate Jesus’ birth. In the Scripture that we just read the writer of Mark’s Gospel is encouraging us to look for Jesus to return because it is a certainty.

We say that Jesus will come again when we celebrate Communion together, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” But is it just something we say? It should be a defining reality that impacts our faith and lives.[[1]](#footnote-1) It makes me think of a bumper sticker I saw once, it said, “Jesus is coming back, look busy.” What would you do if Jesus were going to return tomorrow? “Would you reconcile with a long lost friend or family member? Would you finish a project you started years ago? Would you tell your children, or maybe your parents, that you love them one last time? Would you wrap your beloved in one long, tender embrace? What would you do?”[[2]](#footnote-2) Martin Luther the great Reformer was once asked what he would do if he believed the world would end tomorrow, and he responded, "I would plant a tree today.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The writer of Mark’s Gospel in this entire chapter seems to have two separate things that we are to do. We are to prepare for an imminent apocalypse because Jesus is coming back any minute, and we are also to stay faithful, to wait, and prepare for the long haul.[[4]](#footnote-4) For the writer of Mark’s Gospel it is possible for us to live as though the end is at hand and also stay faithful and wait for the long haul because only God knows when Jesus is returning.

When Jesus does return, Mark’s Gospel tells us there will be suffering, total darkness, the Son of Man will come with power and glory, and angels will gather the chosen ones. We don’t get an explanation of why this will all happen, but we do receive assurance that there will be a happy ending because this world belongs to God.

Now, I have always been of the school of thought that since the time when Jesus returns is not known, then why worry about it. But the writer of Mark’s Gospel seems to believe the opposite, that I should be thinking about Jesus’ return all of the time because it could be this morning, or later today, or tonight.

This Thanksgiving I have thought a lot about my mother-in-law who passed away three years ago. We make her corn casserole and bring it to Thanksgiving every year. And as I was putting the dish into the oven, I just kept thinking about Sherry Smith and all the years that she had made this same dish. I loved my mother-in-law and I would give anything to see her again, to have her make the corn casserole instead of us. I wonder if that is how the writer of Mark’s Gospel felt? Jesus was their friend, their Lord, their Savior, the Messiah, the Anointed One, and those who love Jesus want him to return so much so we are wondering at morning, noon, and at night if now is the time that he might return.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Advent is about waiting for the realization of hope, “it is about longing to know God as fully as we have been known; to see no longer through a dark pane, but face to face; to love as we have been loved; to experience Jesus Christ as he is, and in so doing, to become like him” (1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2).[[6]](#footnote-6) We are always waiting, always watching, always preparing for Christ’s return.

Friday night Lee and I saw the movie Interstellar where Matthew McConaughey explores other planets because the earth has become unlivable. There is a blight that is ruining crop after crop and there is a global food shortage. The earth is broken. Before the movie they showed the preview of the movie opening Christmas Day called Selma. And tears ran down my face as I saw images of Martin Luther King getting arrested and people who were marching getting beaten. And I couldn’t stop thinking about Ferguson and racial inequality and how far we have come as a society and how far we still have to go. Our earth is broken.

Black lives matter and the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson is tragic because he was a human being and his life mattered. [[7]](#footnote-7) In America there are 2.3 million people incarcerated. One million are African American. As of 2001, 1 in 6 black men have been incarcerated. If current trends continue, 1 in 3 black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Last Saturday in Cleveland 12 year old Tamir Rice was shot to death in a park where he was playing with a toy gun.[[9]](#footnote-9) Benjamin Watson, tight end for the New Orleans Saints shared a facebook post that has gone viral. He shared these words, “I'M ANGRY because the stories of injustice that have been passed down for generations seem to be continuing before our very eyes. I'M SAD, because another young life was lost from his family, the racial divide has widened, a community is in shambles, accusations, insensitivity hurt and hatred are boiling over, and we may never know the truth about what happened that day. I'M HOPELESS, because I've lived long enough to expect things like this to continue to happen. I'm not surprised and at some point my little children are going to inherit the weight of being a minority and all that it entails. I'M ENCOURAGED, because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse our authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot and burn. BUT I'M ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through God’s son Jesus and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being. The cure for the Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner tragedies is not education or exposure. It's the Gospel. So, finally, I'M ENCOURAGED because the Gospel gives mankind hope.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

This Advent as we wait and prepare for Jesus to come again may we be shaped by the first Christmas when God became one of us as a vulnerable infant and ended up hanging on a tree.[[11]](#footnote-11) Mark’s Gospel reminds us that God is always with us in those places of vulnerability, openness and need.[[12]](#footnote-12) Tomorrow is World AIDS Day. More than 1.2 million Americans are living with HIV, and almost 1 in 7, 14% are unaware of their infection.[[13]](#footnote-13) About 1 in 4 new HIV infections is among youth aged 13-24. Most of them do not know they are infected, and can unknowingly pass the virus onto others. Globally more than 35 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. The vast majority of people are in low income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. 3.2 million children worldwide are living with HIV.[[14]](#footnote-14) Our earth is broken. This week as you watch the news, and pray for our world, and for our country, may we see how Jesus is with those who are hurting today. Jesus is with those who are crying out for justice today.

I saw one of the most amazing pictures yesterday. It was of a Portland police officer, Sergeant Bret Barnum and 12 year old Devonte Hart hugging at a Portland, Oregon rally protesting the decision of a Missouri grand jury not to indict Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of teen Michael Brown. Devonte has tears running down his face. Devonte was at the rally holding a “Free Hugs” sign bravely standing alone in front of the police barricade. After a while, Sergeant Barnum came up to Devonte and extended his hand. They talked for a few minutes and then Sergeant Barnum asked Devonte why he was crying.

Now, Devonte is a pretty amazing kid. Devonte was adopted when he was 4 by Jen and Sarah Hart. In those 4 brief years he had smoked, consumed alcohol, handled guns, been shot at, and suffered severe abuse and neglect.[[15]](#footnote-15) He knew only a handful of words, and they were mostly curse words.[[16]](#footnote-16) He struggled to identify the names of food, body parts and every day objects. He was a violent toddler and had a lot of development delays. In the last 8 years he has received unconditional love, patience, and acceptance. So, when Sergeant Barnum asked Devonte why he was crying, Devonte said he was worried about the level of police brutality towards young black kids. And Sergeant Barnum sighed and said, “Yes. I know. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Sergeant Barnum then asked if he could have one of those free hugs that Devonte was offering.

God is always with us in our vulnerability, our hurt and our need. May we see how Jesus is with those who are hurting today. Jesus is with those who are crying out for justice today.

1. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2265 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1606 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.webofcreation.org/LENS/luther.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2265 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2265 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2265 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://qz.com/250701/12-things-white-people-can-do-now-because-ferguson/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.cleveland.com/darcy/index.ssf/2014/11/tamir\_rice\_shooting\_tragedy\_ed.html [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/nfl-players-facebook-post-on-ferguson-darren-wilson-michael-brown-decision-goes-viral/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/advent-1-b/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. http://www.davidlose.net/2014/11/advent-1-b/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. http://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/statistics/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/global-statistics/index.html [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. http://www.papertrail.co.nz/meet-devonte-little-boy-big-heart/ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. http://www.papertrail.co.nz/meet-devonte-little-boy-big-heart/ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2014/1129/Devonte-Hart-Sgt.-Bret-Barnum-and-the-hug-felt-round-the-world-video [↑](#footnote-ref-17)