

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 18, 2018

Keep Calm and Keep Showing Up

Mark 13:1-8; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Our Gospel readings reminds me of a little cartoon from a couple of years ago.
The scene is a sidewalk on a city block,
on which two men are walking, one following the other.
Both men have scraggly hair and beards and are wearing prophet robes and sandals,
both are carrying placards.
The first man's placard reads, "The End Is Near."
However, he's looking over his shoulder, a little nervously, at the prophet following him,
whose placard reads, "This Will Never End."
The second prophet, glaring at the first prophet,
says "Your optimism disgusts me."

It's all a matter of faith perspective, I guess,
whether you find the idea of the end of the world
to be a hopeful things or a threatening thing,
and whether you believe God is about to intervene
to bring everything to a grand finale,
or is going to let us all go on living with ourselves.

In one sense today, we can say, "The End Is Near"
because next Sunday is the last Sunday of the Christian calendar,
"Christ the King Sunday"
when we celebrate the grand finale of salvation history:
Christ on the throne and all the world at peace.

Of course, the Sunday after that, assuming it comes,
will be the First Sunday of Advent,
and we will start all over again.

It is interesting,
our lectionary reading for today is from the first 8 verses of Mark chapter 13,
and the last time we read from this chapter was last December,
on the First Sunday of Advent, verses 24-37.

This section of Mark is known as the Little Apocalypse,
in which Jesus calls his disciples to be faithful
in the midst of the travail of the end times.
Sounding like an Old Testament prophet
Jesus tells us all the signs that will accompany these times,
both cosmic and earthly.
It is not a time anyone wants to live through.
Things that seemed to be constant, like the sun, moon, and stars, will fail.
Heaven and earth will be in upheaval.

The community for whom Mark wrote his gospel would have been certain that, indeed, they were the generation living in these end times.

In the year 70 AD, the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and many Jews were either killed or forced to flee the holy city never to return.

Jewish followers of Christ were included in this number, and faced persecution both from the Romans and from their fellow Jews. In fact, the whole Jewish community had fragmented by this time into numerous factions, and they all were killing each other. If not the whole planet, their whole world, at least, was coming to an end.

In Mark's story today, the disciples are marveling at the great stones of the Temple, but Jesus tells them that even that great edifice and the corrupt scribal system hiding behind it, will not stand forever.

"Do you see these great buildings? Jesus asks them. Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

With these alarming words

Jesus withdraws with his disciples to the Mount of Olives from which they can view the Temple mount.

His inner circle, Peter, James, John and Andrew, come to him and ask, *"When will this be?"*

What should we watch for to know it's all about to happen?"

They sound anxious.

Who wouldn't be anxious, when the world as you know it is about to go away?

But Jesus responds without anxiety.

At the center of his Little Apocalypse, is a word of encouragement: *Keep Calm.*

Don't get yourselves all worked up over would-be messiahs.

There are many who will come and say things like:

"I'm the only one who can save you."

They may be deluded enough to believe this of themselves, and *they will lead many astray*, but don't you be deluded with them.

Do not be alarmed. Jesus says.

Keep Calm, and keep trusting in me.

Then he does give the disciples some of what they are wanting to know.

He begins to tell them of the signs of the end:

Wars, civil wars, natural disasters, famine.

Jill Duffield of *The Presbyterian Outlook* reads these words and writes:

"Check, check, check and check.

"I can read the headlines and spin the globe on any given day and see Jesus' signs of the End Times emblazoned in print or pixels.

She confesses,
“I am alarmed.
Even if these are the birth pangs of the new life, new era,
new God-thing on the horizon,
I am alarmed.”

“We Christians have been waiting a long time.
We've been in labor for millennia with no pain relief in sight.
All has not been thrown down.
The world order of the rich getting richer and the poor getting trampled remains.”¹

Do you remember the bumper stickers and t-shirts that started showing up
soon after 9/11.
They use a variety of slang, but the gist is,
“If you aren't outraged, you aren't paying attention.
It is interesting, because we see this alarm, this angst, this anger expressed
by people who are pointing fingers of blame
in very different directions.

It's exhausting, isn't it? All this righteous anger.
Even when some of it is well founded.

Duffield offers her own list of alarming signs which will resonate with many:
“The recent climate report that detailed
how we are about to fall off a global warming cliff...
The images of starving children in Yemen,
babies of skin and bones...
Reading stories of people risking their lives, leaving all they have,
walking to our border in order to escape
poverty and violence and terror...
Another mass shooting
and another and another...”
“Jesus,” she asks,
“how can you tell your followers, *do not be alarmed?*”

Probably, it is safe to say, the disciples' anxieties were not immediately assuaged,
anymore than ours are today.
Fear and anger are the fully human response to a sense of threat.
And demagogues of every age
are quite adept at taking the angst of their time
and frothing it up for their own gain.

But Jesus calls us to resist the fear-mongering.
Do not be alarmed. He says to us.
Keep calm.

Well, how exactly are we to *keep calm*?
The letter to the Hebrews offers us some help.

Giving us an image of Christ seated at the right hand of God,
Hebrews reminds us that Christ has already won the victory over his enemies.

In the assurance that Christ has already done for us and for all the world,
what none of us could do for ourselves or for our loved ones,
we are able to stand **in the presence of God without fear.**

Why then should we be afraid of anything else?

Why should we be alarmed at anything?

In the assurance of what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ,
we are set free to Keep Calm.

But *Keeping Calm* is not a passive state of existence.

It is not a withdrawal from the world.

For immediately on the heels of this assurance of what Christ has done for us,
Hebrews call us to active engagement with one another and the world:

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
for he who has promised is faithful.*

*And let us consider how to provoke one another
to love and good deeds...*

Now that is a fascinating turn of phrase:

Consider how to...provoke...one another...

...to love ... and good deeds...

Provoke one another to love.

The Greek word is *paroxysmos*, as in, a *paroxysm* —
a sudden attack or intense expression of emotion.

It suggests that if we are provoked,
we learn to channel that experience into love lived out in good deeds.

If we get stirred up,

the way of Christ is **not** to respond in anger, or in hateful speech,
(whether that hateful speech actually comes from our lips,
or we just murmur it in our hearts);

the way of Christ is **not** to protect ourselves or grasp at power or hoard wealth;
the way of Christ is to be provoked into love lived out in good deeds.

And Hebrews adds another line of admonition:

*let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,
not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

To be more accurate today, Hebrews would need to say,
*not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of **many.***

The neglect of meeting together with the community of Christ
is a sign that we are drugged into a spiritual stupor
by the comforts that wealth can purchase us,
by the distractions of entertainment,
or by sheer laziness,
or — perhaps — by frantic work to maintain the flow of wealth.

[I'm not talking here about people whose employers require them to work on Sunday.
I'm talking about those who have a choice —
well, those of you who have a choice.
my employer requires me to work on Sunday.]

Unless we come together how will we
provoke one another to love and good deeds.
Unless we come together how will we
encourage one another all the more
as we see the Day approaching.

Coming together often is the biblical vision of Christian community.
I understand that we have the technology to watch something on a screen on Sunday morning.
And if we out of town, or physically unable to be present with our community,
that's a decent solution —
but it is easy to hide behind a screen.

The vision into which we baptize our children is something greater than this.
When we promise to raise them in the Christian faith,
and when we promise to be the ones to nurture these children,
we are talking about coming together.

It is not the words we say that serve as the proof of our faithfulness,
it is whether we *Keep Showing Up* after we've said them.

Finally, the stewardship commitments we make today, and the offerings we bring
are about continuing to be
the community that *keeps calm and keeps showing up*
the community that *provokes one another to love and good deeds*
the community that *rests in the assurance*
that Christ has achieved the victory
and sits now at the right hand of God
until the last enemy of life is overturned.

Whatever end you fear,
the end of the world,
or at least the end of the world as you know it,
or your own personal end...

...Hear the words of our Lord:
Do not be alarmed.
Instead, *Keep Calm,*
Be provoked...to love and good deeds...
and Keep...Showing...Up

¹ Jill Duffield, "Looking Into the Lectionary," in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, November 12, 2018.