Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent (B), December 3, 2017

Mark 13:24-37 (esp. v. 29, 31)

Rev. Micah Bauer

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our sermon text for this morning is from Mark 13: “So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates… Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Thus far the text.

## Jehovah’s Witnesses: the end is coming

Two weeks ago, a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses came knocking on my door. When I saw the two of them with their pamphlets, I couldn’t help but smile; this was going to be a fun conversation.

They had a question for me—one that they found extremely important: “Who do you think is in control of the world?” I thought, “Well, this is an easy one.” So I answered, “Well, Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, and he is sitting at the Father’s right hand on high ruling over all things right now.” One of them visibly gulped.

They proceeded to explain to me how, in fact, *Satan* has control over the world right now. And we can see this clearly in how the world is falling apart—I mean, just look at our political situation. We then had about a half-hour discussion about the End Times. They warned me about the coming Tribulation, and they wanted to make sure that I was on the right side.

It was kind of them to be concerned for me. Of course, there were many questions that I didn’t ask them, such as why they would want me to join their church if they believe that only 144,000 people will be saved, while there are currently over 8 million Jehovah’s Witnesses—I mean, it weakens their odds if I come onboard. I didn’t ask them why they believe that Jesus is not God or one of a hundred questions I’d like to. I was distracted by their overall emphasis: this world is coming to an end, and that’s a *bad* thing.

## We can clearly see that the end is coming

To claim that the world is coming to an end will surprise no one. Every generation since Jesus has made this claim. Our own generations have made this claim as we have watched a rapid decline of morality, paired with a just-as-rapid rise in the abuse of technology; together these things have allowed us to do all sorts of evil very efficiently. Today, we question the foundation of everything, and we even deny that any objective, universal foundation can exist to give meaning to words like male, female, marriage, authority, right, wrong, god, and life. We have no northern star to set us straight, and we rejoice in rebelling against the wisdom of our fathers. How can we straighten this out? We cannot; the end must be near.

## Jesus foretold this tribulation

*Of course* we can see signs that the end must be near! When Jesus was telling his disciples about the tribulation that was to come, with its “wars and rumors of wars” and whatnot, he also tells them, “*when you see these things taking place*, you know that he is near, at the very gates.” *When* you see these signs, not *if* you see them. You most certainly *will* watch the world get worse and worse, and this is a sign to you that the end will come—that Jesus will come.

Therefore, as things get worse and worse, this is a sign that you should… what? Try harder and harder to fix it all? Withdraw into monastic communities? No. “Therefore, [while the Master is away and things get worse and worse,] stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.” That is, trust that the Master will come back soon. Live as if the Master will come back soon. Look, and watch, and pray for the Master to come back soon.

## Jesus also foretold that he would come back

Jesus told several variations of this parable: a master lets out his vineyard to tenants and then goes away for a while; ten virgins wait for the bridegroom to come; a master charges his servants to take care of his finances while he’s gone. He paralleled the signs of the tribulation with how the blooming of the fig tree signifies that summer is just around the corner. He directly tells his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die and on the third day to rise. He tells them that after he has risen and ascended into heaven, he will come back for them. He tells them to watch for his coming. He tells them all this beforehand so that they will not be surprised, or caught off guard, or stray into doubt and unbelief.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he gave to his Church signs of his enduring presence with us. In the waters of Holy Baptism, Jesus is present with us. He puts his name—his very self—upon us. He puts his Holy Spirit within us. As the water washes over our skin, Jesus washes away our sin. In the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus is present with us. He is present in his very body and blood. He gives us a foretaste of the feast that will come when he returns and welcomes us to his heavenly banquet. He has told us ahead of time that he would die, and rise, and ascend, and return, and these are his signs that this is true. These are the seals of his promise.

Jesus promises, and it is so. Anyone else may break their promises to you. Anything else in your life—your feelings, your intellect, your experience; your family, your friends, your church; your love, your faith, your virtuous life—all of it will fail you.

But the promises of God in Christ Jesus will never fail, never lie, never stop. Heaven and earth *will* pass away—we cannot even trust in what we see and experience. But what will never pass away? What will endure even the end of the world? “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” “The word of the Lord endures forever.” Christ has promised you that he will come back for you, and that promise stands true, even when this world comes to an end.

## Encouragement: foretold tribulation, foretold coming

Why is it what when we say, “Well, it’s not the end of the world,” we mean, “Well, it’s not that bad”? The end of the world is a *good* thing. The end of this world means that Jesus is coming back to make a new heavens and a new earth for us to live in.

This is what threw me off about the Jehovah’s Witnesses that came to my door. They were *afraid* of the end of the world. They were *afraid* of the coming Tribulation. I think they were afraid because they weren’t sure if they were on the right side—if they were part of the 144,000. We Lutherans believe that, like most things in the book of Revelation, this number is figurative. Also, like the whole book of Revelation, this number is meant to encourage us and give us hope: a whole lot of people will enter eternal life.

When Jesus speaks of the end of the world, he is *not* trying to get us to figure out when it will happen. He is not trying to get us to despair about the Great Tribulation. He does not desire for us to doubt whether or not he is really going to save us. Quite the opposite. When Jesus speaks of the end of the world, he emphasizes the fact that he will come back for us. He told us beforehand about the really bad things that would happen *so that we would be encouraged* by the other thing that he told us would happen: he will return to us. As we see his promise of the Tribulation coming true, we know that his promise to return to us is true, as well.

We are not discouraged as sin ravages the world and even overwhelms us, because this tells us that Christ is coming back to save us from our sin. We do not despair as the world falls apart, because this points to the new world that he will make. We do not fear death, because Jesus has promised us resurrection and life. When the fig tree buds, it means that *summer* is coming, not winter; when we see the world falling apart, it means that Jesus is coming.

## Therefore, stay awake

Therefore, dear Christians, stay awake. Keep watch. Look for his coming. Trust his promises. You cannot trust what the newspapers tell you, or even what your own eyes tell you. It may look like Satan is in control of the world, but Jesus is holding him on a leash, and he will soon destroy him.

It may look like things can never get better, but when the world falls apart Jesus will return and renew it. How do we know? Jesus has promised. “Heaven and earth *will* pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.