

Managing Un-Expectations

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov. 28, 2021
based in Matthew 24:36-44*

This is the first Sunday of the pre-Christmas season we call Advent. While December marks the tail-end of another calendar year, the season of Advent marks the beginning of a whole new worship year.

So, is this an ending or a beginning? I guess it all depends on what calendar you're using. Our scripture, as always on this first Sunday in the new church year, has Jesus in an apocalyptic mood; a subject we looked at last week, as well.

Jesus is talking about endings; he's pointing at signs, and wonders, and odd occurrences. He says, "two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left." It's kinda weird when Jesus goes apocalyptic.

The word, apocalyptic is a high-fallutin Greek word which just means, unveiling, or revealing. Apocalyptic literature in the Bible makes a lot of main-line sophisticated Christians like us nervous.

I mean, look, some of us here are card carrying Presbyterians. We have long been known as the frozen chosen, right? We may *not* be the most exciting people in the world. I mean, when it comes to worship we would rather be shot than jump up and down, or speak in tongues or stuff like that, right?

But you know, you can count on us Presbies; even with the flu we get up in the morning, and we have our tea or coffee and we go off to work and put in a decent 8 hour day. I mean, you can depend on us to get the job done even during a pandemic. We are steady if we are anything at all.

So, don't talk about the end-times to us. Don't go all apocalyptic. We're all about putting one foot in front of the other no matter what.

Well, let me make a few observations about apocalyptic literature. First of all, it is NOT a prediction about the future as most people think. No, it is a claim about

today; about the times in which we live. It is a claim about the precariousness of the present.

I mean, Jesus says to his friends, “Hey fellows, this temple that looks at once so eternal, so fixed, so stable, isn’t really. It is passing away. This world, this American culture of ours that we often think about as something that will be here forever, ‘world without end, amen,’ is, in fact, precarious; it is moving along; it is ending. There will be a day when there will be no tomorrow.

Of course, it is no surprise that such words make us nervous. I mean, if we’re healthy, if we live in a body we’d rather not surrender, why would we want to cash-in now?

Besides, we like to think of Jesus as more like an exemplary moral teacher who helps us get out of bed in the morning and have a nicer day. We like to think of Jesus as a life-coach who gives us a little spiritual shot-in-the-arm and helps us cope a little better with the world as it is.

But no, this Jesus, the one who speaks to us on the first Sunday of advent, is, in fact, more disturbing than that. This is the Jesus who says, “Hey, when you think about this present moment, don’t take anything for granted; don’t put too many eggs in your little basket, for the present moment is ending – it’s passing away.”

In another apocalyptic part of the gospel Jesus is in the city of Jerusalem, and the disciples are just stunned at the sight before them. Here is this huge temple built by King Herod, friend of the Romans, made of gargantuan marble stones; it just stands there glistening in the Middle Eastern sun.

It looks to the disciples like it’s been there for a millennium, when it’s only been standing a few years. They ask Jesus, their spokesperson, for a few ceremonial words since they’ve walked 80 plus miles from Capernaum to see this edifice that they are now in awe of. And Jesus obliges them this way. He says, “God is going to dismantle this temple. All of it. In fact, there won’t be one stone left upon another.”

What a Debbie Downer.

You see, what Jesus knows is that God is not only in the construction business, God is also in the *deconstruction* business. God is not only the one who made the stars in the sky and the sea that laps upon our Oregon shores; no, the same God is going to make an end of everything and everybody here. Everything, even the marble temple, has an expiration date. It sounds like bad news.

A dozen years ago I was the interim pastor at Westminster Presbyterian across the river in Irvington. That church was connected with the city of Portland in a big way. Like this church, it's full of overachievers. Congressman, Earl Blumenauer isn't a big church goer, but he shows up for the midnight Christmas eve service there.

There are lots of people in the church who made the city what it was with the light rail and bike paths and bridges. They like to think they are building something sustainable; something that will last hundreds of years if not longer.

The wonderful children's author, Beverly Cleary, who died last year at 104 years old, grew up in the neighborhood, attended that church, and in her series of books about a girl named Ramona, she had Ramona go to what she called "the big stone church" where she was a sheep in the Christmas pageant. Well, that was Westminster.

Now, why am I telling you this? Well that big stone church was built to look about 600 years older than it really is. Unlike this church they have traditional pews and they are bolted down. It was built to communicate that while that neighborhood would surely change and houses and restaurants and even Lloyd Center would come and go, THAT church; that huge stone church would last ... forever.

But that is not what Jesus, the founder of the "Big C" Church was selling; not on the first Sunday in advent, at least.

No, for Jesus, everything is up for grabs and the things you thought would be here forever will not, in fact, be here all that long. "Life is short," as someone is fond of saying.

“I am the Lord, I make alive and I take life away,” says God in *Deuteronomy*. God does more than create. In one of the apostle Paul’s letters God says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise.” Go figure.

I remember a wonderful woman who went to divinity school in mid-life. I asked her what happened; what had she given up to live her dream. She kind of laughed – not a happy laugh, it was a kind of a cynical one actually, and she said, “I had a great life before this. You know, I had a really good job. I was making real money, until Jesus ripped it all away from me.”

She went on and said, “It caused a crisis in my marriage. Yes, and my kids said they would never forgive me for uprooting the family, moving them away from schools they liked and their best friends so I could go to seminary.”

Let’s be honest. There are people, tons of people in this congregation today, who can tell us not only about the *gifts* of God but also the *taking* of God. Apocalyptic Jesus says, “Don’t sugar coat it.”

But, let me remind us all, this ending and beginning thing goes both ways.

I remember a woman who, when her beloved husband died, said she thought her life was over. That’s just how she put it. But, she said, “Now I realize, six months along, it feels like a brand new life is opening up for me. This ending I was so depressed about, is really a new beginning for me. I’ve been given a whole new life.” Imagine that.

Here’s a similar account from a woman named Alison from Corvallis ...

A GUY I KNOW WAS TOLD by his doctor that he had cancer and would die within a year. There he was, working at a job that was OK but not great, living in a place that was nice but not paradise, dating a woman he liked a lot but didn’t love. He was just warming up, you know? The way most of us are.

So what did he do? He quit his job, sold everything, packed up, and moved to Key West, where he bought a boat, because he’d always wanted to sail around the Keys on a little boat in the sunshine. And he did.

After a while, he went to a doctor in Key West to see how much time he had left. The doctor got the guy's old records and ran new tests and then said the first doctor had made a mistake: he'd never had cancer at all.

Alison said, "You know, I think about that guy sometimes, sailing around on his little boat in the ocean, living his dream, all because he found out he was mortal."

Maybe Christians should be people who in the most intense moments of crisis and distress and loss and even terror can say, "I wonder what God is up to now?" It means thinking outside the box. It can be pretty radical.

Here's another story – not about a person but about a newspaper. It's from Steven Keller of Ohio ...

***BE IT A BLESSING OR A CURSE**, for the past fifteen years I have owned, published, and edited a weekly newspaper in a small, economically challenged Appalachian town. From the start, I was quick to editorialize about the wrongs, as I saw them, in our community. I made enemies. Our old, wood-frame office twice fell victim to arsonists, with little or no damage. The third try, however, was successful. On a hot August evening the building burned to the ground. We lost everything.*

We produced the next issue of the paper on a home computer, and it was only then that our four-person staff began to feel and act like a family. That issue of the paper drew the community around us. When our readers saw how important what we were doing was to us, it became important to them. I believed then, and still do, that the fire provided a true cleansing.

That's it. A cleansing; something that re-forms us and the way we look at everything. It's no easy thing, but hey, that's what this season holds up for us to examine. This is what this season celebrates every year. Think of Ebenezer Scrooge.

Think of George Bailey played by Jimmy Stewart in the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life;" George Bailey remade from stem to stern; cleansed in the crucible of living this difficult and precious thing we call, LIFE.

One more story ...

The noted preacher, the Rev. Will Willimon came to my Utah church a couple of years ago and he spoke about a student mission trip to Honduras he'd once been a part of.

A group of twenty of us were working a couple of weeks in the impoverished village of San Marco, running a makeshift health clinic. Each night we would build a fire and sit with villagers singing. One night a student had the bright idea that we should all go around and share our favorite Bible verse (which is always a threat to Christians who are not that well versed in the Bible). Someone mentioned John 3:16, another "The Lord is my shepherd;" someone else mentioned "the love chapter" in 1st Corinthians.

And then a Honduran woman said through an interpreter that her favorite verse was from Mark 13; the part where "not one stone will be left upon another," one day. She said, "That passage has always been such a comfort to me."

Comfort? I thought. Sounds like Jesus on a bad day to me.

How could Jesus going Apocalyptic be a comfort? Then the nurse who was sitting right beside that woman who was translating for her turned my way and said, "She has given birth five times and three of her children have died due to malnutrition."

And I got it. Sometimes the difference between bad news and "the good news" depends on where you are standing when you get the news.

Jesus says. This world as it is, is not what God had in mind. One day God is going to end everything. Yes, and God is going to wipe a tear from every eye, like that Honduran woman's.

"Keep watch," Jesus said, "because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." Or in what strange or wonderful guise.

Amen