***“Wake Up”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Dec. 3, 2023*

*based on Mark 13:24-37*

You probably know that representatives of many nations are currently meeting in Dubai for a climate summit. They are meeting for another 9 days. President Biden is missing it – partly because so much else is threatening the future of the planet.

It’s not like the climate is settling down. We Oregonians were relatively lucky this year, but whacky stuff keeps happening. In August there was a *fire tornado* in British Colombia. These are very rare wind-whirl-ups caused by low humidity hitting a cold front coming onto a fire source. There were also reverse waterfalls in Utah this year. I’m not making this up.

A reverse waterfall is water flowing backwards up a cliff due to extreme winds. Well, these things sound nutty, but it’s like we’re getting used to extreme weather events. We’re not surprised anymore.

Having heard the passage this morning from the gospel of Mark, these events have a Biblical sound to them, which is why when climate activists say, “We have to act now if we are to have any chance to dodge major catastrophe,” there are still many Christians who say, “What’s the point? This is just proof that God is bringing down the curtain on the world.”

So who are the alarmists? The scientist saying climate catastrophe is already upon us, or the Christians who think Armageddon is at hand?

Well, religious fanatics pointing a shaky finger at the end of the world have been around for 2000 years, at least. They have provided background noise our whole lives.

I’m talking about the people who exploit people’s natural fears by grossly misreading the Bible. These folks fueled the beginnings of Mormonism. They started The Seventh Day Adventist church, as well, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Thirteen years ago, Harold Camping, an odd but popular evangelist in Oakland California, announced that the world would end on May 21, 2011.

Remember him? There were many large billboards along freeways all over the country announcing it, saying, “The Bible Guarantees it.”

Well, of course it wasn’t any more true than any of the dozens of similar predictions that had come before. But such dissapointments never dissuade similar narcissistic teachers from warning the world anew.

Of course, what they often see as signs that we are in “the last days,”

I usually see as signs that the spirit of God is gaining ground. I’m thinking of things like the steady advancement of the rights of LGBTQIA people. Steady advancement until now, at least. With such differing agendas, it’s no wonder Christians don’t read the Bible uniformly.

I remember hearing Harold Camping many years ago on his daily radio show answering a question from a puzzled believer about the inerrancy of the Bible. The young caller said he had a problem believing the Bible had no errors because of direct disparities he’d found in the text.

He mentioned the fact that in one gospel it says that Judas committed suicide by hanging himself (Matthew). In another it said Judas died by falling on his sword (Luke’s account in the book of Acts). Harold Camping said he saw no problem there. Here is how he explained it. He said, Judas tried to hang himself and the rope broke, and he fell on his sword.

You can’t make this stuff up. This is nonsense on stilts, but so many religious folk are willing to be led astray. They have brains but refuse to use them.

Let me go back a little to where I began. The times we live in are extrememly trying, and it’s difficult to navigate in such a time. The cold and the long dark nights do bad things to our judgment. They exacerbate our fears.

One thing Advent tells us is that people of faith usually agree that it will get darker before it gets light again. Week by week we will light new candles, but even as we light them, the length of our daily darkness will increase until the solstice.

“Keep awake,” Jesus says. What’s he talking about?

In this morning’s text, Jesus and four of his disciples had walked to the Mount of Olives outside the city of Jerusalem. They sat down there and looked across the valley at the great walled city.

It must have looked stunning to these country folk – about like how Chicago looked to me after growing up in Sacramento and knowing nothing of how incredibly awesome the Sears Tower looks when you stand at the doorway and look straight up.

Right then, in the midst of their wonder, Jesus told the disciples that the whole marble city would soon come crashing down. Well, they wanted him to tell them when. How would they know when it would tumble?

Instead of answering, Jesus doubled down on details and told them how the sky itself would be dismantled. How the stars would fall like baubles from a broken charm bracelet. How the moon, too, would be darkened before they saw the Son of Man come riding in on clouds with great majesty.

He was not discussing this disturbing subject in order to scare his disciples. Rather, it was to reassure them and give them hope that no matter what happened, God would be with them.

They needed to know that something as frightening as the end of the world was in God’s hands.

When it would seem to them that the cosmos itself was about to collapse and every light in the sky might go out, he wanted them to remember what he had told them; that no matter what, God was sovereign – sovereign over darkness as well as light – over destruction as well as creation.

He wanted them to keep awake, meaning he was concerned that they NOT be overcome by fear. He wanted them to remember that God was still in control.

By the time the gospel writer, Mark, wrote this down, 30 or 40 years had elapsed. Tensions were so high with Rome (as Jesus had predicted) that it seemed the end of time was near. It was like the second or third wave of a pandemic when you begin to wonder who will be spared.

Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple was destroyed. The emperor was killing Jews and Christians for sport while Christians were fighting amongst themselves -- their whole families often being torn apart because of their differing loyalties. Sound familiar?

False messiahs were setting up shop on every street corner, each claiming they were the only prophet favored by God. Those who followed the risen Jesus wondered if they had been hoodwinked. The news was just so bad. Events were getting way too scary.

This is when Mark told them the story again – how Jesus himself had predicted it all, how he had tried telling them that they could not have a new world without first letting go of the old one which needed to implode before anything could rise from the ashes.

The good news of the gospel was that the old world ***was*** ending, being swept away – and the end was coming *not* because God was an underachiever, but because God was ever-present, ready and anxious to make all things new.

In the meantime, our job is to watch; to be ready, to stay alert and not be sucked in by fear mongers.

According to one interpreter (Barbara Brown Taylor) there are three different ways that people wait for the Second Coming of Christ.

The first way is to look for the literal end of the world. Many people have tried to figure out when the end of the world will come by dissecting the Book of Revelation and the Book of Daniel – looking for signs; making mathematical calculations based on numbers found here and there in scripture.

A few enterprising folk have made millions of dollars by writing books sold at Costco explaining when the end of the world will come. But Jesus says, "no one knows the day or the hour except God.”

The second way is to let our awareness of troubling events heighten our commitment to the present. In other words, to redouble our efforts to make the best of the lives that God has given us by helping those in need.

We talked about that last week when we discussed the sheep and the goats parable. How Jesus says we will be judged in the end by how we treated the hungry, the naked, the sick, the lonely, and those in prison. That’s it. That’s the criteria for our judgment.

Followers of Jesus are meant to be positive examples in a world that loves to go negative out of fear.

There is an old story that comes out of Colonial America. There was an eclipse of the sun that caught almost everyone off guard. It hadn’t been predicted. The Continental Congress happened to be in session.

Well, the legislative chamber in Philadelphia was plunged into near darkness. Many of the legislators were afraid . . . they thought it might be the end of the world.

Several representatives moved quickly to adjourn, but before the presiding officer could call for a vote, another Colonialist stood and said, “Mr. Speaker, if it is NOT the end of the world and we adjourn, we will appear to be fools. If it IS the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move that candles be brought in and lit.”

Let me say it again --- a second way to deal with troubling events is to decide to be positive examples in a world that loves to go negative out of fear.

A third way to wait for Christ's return is to realize that there is not just one end to the world, figuratively speaking.

Let me explain. When Jesus died, the disciples thought the world had ended.

Their lives, as they knew them as his followers, seemed to be over.

Some years later, when Jerusalem fell and Nero began his killing spree, they again were tempted to think the world had ended.

I am old enough to remember the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. We all feared the world as we knew it might be about to end.

The world can end at any time with a declaration of war, with the death of a child, with a bleak diagnosis. Lots of things can end the world as we know it.

Same thing happened after 9 -11 when we wondered if we’d ever fly in planes again with peace of mind.

Well, into a world like this where we are terrified about what will happen after the next election, Advent comes with its startling reminder that once again it’s God’s intention to drawn near and make Godself known among us. Advent season comes round in order to wake us up and steady our steps.

Advent reminds us not only that God's reign is coming, but that God's reign is already here, right here, right now. God is with us, no matter what.

It has been said many times … we live in the midst of a divine drama that is "already" but "not yet". It is "already" in the sense that God sent Jesus into the world to be born of a woman, an event we celebrate at Christmas. It is "not yet" in the sense that we are still processing that mystery.

"Already" Jesus has shown us glimpses of God’s loving face, but we do "not yet" live in complete communion. How does that play out -- I mean, in everyday life?

Here’s an example: cancer research is moving ahead on many fronts. Some of the most important work is going on here in Portland. Scientists are taking our

T cells, the first line of defense we are born with, and they are rejigging them. Maybe you have heard about this.

As we get older, those T cells, our major defenders, get rusty. But scientists here have found a way to take the receptors on those cells, receptors that are programmed by nature to fight various specific invaders, take them off old T cells and put them on fresh ones which they then inject by the billions into cancer patients, targeting their cancers.

Some of those researchers are bold, calling this the end game. We’re not at the goal line yet, they say, but we can see it from here.

This is what advent waiting amounts to.

So, we wait. We hang in there, not subject to fear mongers of any kind. We stand steady. We do what we can where we are to steady others. That is what Jesus is concerned that we do in times such as these.

Amen.