

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
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Isaiah 64: 1-9
Mark 13: 24-27

CHRISTMAS AND THE SECOND COMING

I was recently intrigued by something. You know how, when you are looking for something else on the internet, you'll have your interest pricked by a particular word and phrase. While I was trying to understand part of the Isaiah passage and looking for other things, I came across a website called *The Omega Letter*. This is a site that advertises that it is a book on the prophecies of the Bible and it actually updates itself every month with current events that have fulfilled prophecy in anticipation of Christ's second coming, His return to this world. And if you sign on, it promises to give you a front row seat to every event that points to the culmination of the world. I suppose it's a modern version of the sandwich guy on the corner proclaiming "the end is at hand."

I was almost tempted out of curiosity, not because I'm into that sort of prediction, palm reading and hand-wringing, theology. I just wanted to know how the other part of Christendom really entertained itself, I suppose. And then I noticed that this website that was predicting the imminent end of the world gave you a discount if you subscribed for three years. I thought to myself, "I don't think so." If they aren't willing to trust me month to month, how reliable can this information be?

Jesus is talking to his disciples and he tells them about signs of the end. And as detailed as it appears at first glance, there really isn't a lot of detail there. He builds into his disciples an anticipation of something that is going to happen in the future that will keep them, as he says later in the chapter, alert—awake. That the temple is being destroyed and the moon and the stars are falling from the heavens—what else could happen that would keep you awake?

Clearly, the message is disconcerting to his disciples and to later Christians as they watched when foreign powers took over Jerusalem, as people were exiled; and all across the Roman empire, as they understood that darkness was moving into their circumstances. We know a little bit about that. If you've been really alert, you may have noticed that each day seems to shorten itself by five to seven minutes. The sun drops a little quicker in the west and darkness comes. During this time of year when the days are progressively getting shorter, we have all known that sense of melancholy as the leaves stopped turning brilliant colors, and grey became the dominant color in our world. We've known this even before they named it, but now it's clear that what we have been experiencing is something they call Seasonal Affective Disorder—appropriately, "SAD." Sometimes the winter months can be very, very sad. And the sadness the disciples were experiencing, the sadness that sometimes comes into our walk with Christ may be caused by tremendous upheaval in our lives. Tremendous changes that we had not predicted. Sickness overtakes us. But there's an even worse illness than the ones that

attack our bodies. There's the sickness of our self-serving human nature. Jesus later says, "You'll know when the fruit begins to come on the fig tree." What he's saying is that the darkness and the hope that we long for to escape our sadness is as close at hand as the everyday things in our lives.

Be alert. Be awake. Be on your guard, he says later. Watch out! Watch out every time you're tested. Every time you face a trial. What will you do? Where will you go for your hope?

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas explains why it's so easy for us to lose hope. It's part of that whole illness that grips our souls. We are the most impatient people, aren't we? And hope without patience, Hauerwas says, becomes illusional; or as we saw this weekend, it becomes fanaticism, desperation—violent desperation. And he says hope combined with patience, which is what Jesus is encouraging his disciples to grasp—hope with patience leads to an adventure of faith that even though our hope has little chance, it seems, of being fulfilled, the adventure continues. And our faith is strengthened. Being the sort of theologian he is, Hauerwas even pushes it a little further when he says hope without patience is desperation and hope with patience is an adventure of faith; but he says patience without hope leads us to accept the world too quickly just as we find it and not as it could be. What darkness have we entertained in our individual adventures that have led us to accept the world—our world, our conduct—as it is instead of what it could be.

I wonder if we've forgotten. Because of our time together—our many, many years—I wonder if it's too easy for us to just come and pretend that we understand advent as more than preparation for Christmas. Advent is preparation for the second coming.

I think it was Ronald Reagan's administration that loved to tell the story of the couple who had been married for so long, and one night the wife was watching TV with her husband in bed and she said, "You know what? I'm in the mood for an ice cream cone." The husband said, "OK. I'll go get it." She said, "No I want chocolate sauce on my ice cream cone." He said, "OK—ice cream cone, chocolate sauce. Got it." She said, "No. I want whipped cream." He said, "OK." And as he walked out the door, she said, "You better write it down; you're going to forget." He said, "I got it. Ice cream cone. Chocolate sauce. Whipped cream. I got it." Then she said, "And a cherry on top. Don't forget—a cherry on top." He comes back up a little later and hands her a napkin and she opens it up and there's a ham sandwich. And she says, "I knew you'd forget. You forgot the mustard."

And we forget, don't we? We forget that we are a people anticipating Christ's return. We become so familiar with forgetfulness that we don't even notice the darkness that encroaches all around us.

What are we waiting for in this world? Why do we insist on believing that Christ will indeed return? First, he told us he would. And second, everything else is deprived of meaning if his word does not stand forever. His first coming loses so much of its poignancy without the promise of his return—when he will gather all of us, it says, from the

four corners of the earth and the heavens. Lent has much more to do with advent than just the purple color that adorns our pulpit and our soul. Lent has to do with our accepting again that Christ will return; and that, as Elizabeth Jennings said, the mystery of this advent, this coming, is that God took time and entered history—our history. And God will return, and we will be with him forever. But Jesus says this will happen only if we stay alert. In this season of light that defies the darkness, may we be awake, may we be watching for Christ in one another and in every opportunity of worship.

Amen.