

Can You Believe It?

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1 Sam 1:4-20

Mark 13:1-8

It was Christmas 1994. Tracey and I were near the end of a 10 hour car ride from western Pennsylvania to my mother's house in Massachusetts. We came to a stoplight which was inevitably red, as all lights near the end of long car trips are. I glanced at a worn flyer posted on a pole that asked "Are you ready for the second coming? October 31, 1993."

I had several reactions. First I found it disconcerting to have reached the end of a long drive only to face a sign telling us that we had arrived too late for the second coming. Second I found it ironic that the second coming had been predicted for Halloween night, and wondered if Jesus had descended from the clouds and started knocking on doors if he might have been handed a fistful of candy and sent on his way.

On subsequent rides home I always noticed the sign, which was more tattered with age each holiday. I began to wonder who had put the sign up. What had made them think that they knew the date? What had happened to them? How had they felt in the days leading up to that fateful Halloween night? How did they feel the next morning? How many people had they convinced and what had happened to them?

It is amazing how often these predictions have been made despite Jesus' warnings against making them. It is amazing the convoluted system of interpretation of signs and dates that have been made to calculate the time of the return of Jesus despite his words that even He did not know the time or date. I promise that I will not be making any predictions about the coming of the end of time.

The Christian church has struggled since the first years after Jesus to try and explain some of the words of Jesus that made it seem that the end of the world was imminent. Many early Christians believed that they would see the end of the world in their lifetime. It was perhaps the first theological crisis faced by Christians, something they thought they understood but which did not happen as they thought it would.

Yet I can't think of a time when I have given the end of time any more thought than looking at that faded sign glued to the pole of a street light. It obviously interested the followers of Jesus, because they asked him about it, and it obviously interests others, because books and movies about the end of time are very often best sellers.

So when I read the passage from Mark's gospel, I wanted to read other passages where Jesus talked about the end of time, and I found this same passage we read in Mark was elaborated in the Gospel of Matthew and these words in particular jumped out at me.... from Matthew, chapter 24 "many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold."

As I said, I will not be making any predictions about the coming of the end of time, nor am I going to suggest that we are particularly close to that time. But I do believe that we have seen the results of many false prophets deceiving the people.

Intentionally or not, there have been many who have made claims that they were speaking for God and they have done little but spread fear and anger and deceit. The list of the ways that God has been abused is nearly endless. People have claimed that God was for them, against others, choosing one side over another in political debates, cultural clashes. The church itself has been silent when it should have spoken, and spoken when it should have been silent. And now the church has been largely cast aside to whither like that faded sign proclaiming the end is near.

I believe this is the biggest area of ministry and outreach facing the church today. We do not face a world untouched by Christianity, we face a world which has largely rejected Christianity. Some have rejected it because of false promises, others have left the church behind because of simplistic answers to complicated questions, still others have left because the church did not adhere to the moral code as they understood it.

The list of reasons may be nearly endless as well: disillusionment with the church as leaders in the church have shown themselves to be just as fallible as the rest of the world. The church walls are not immune to the problems and shortcomings of the human race. There are just as many sinners inside the church walls as there are outside.

Despite all of that, no one doubts that humanity is still suffering. Think of one of the most popular series of books lately: The Chicken Soup for the Soul series. The Internet bookseller Amazon.com showed 240 matching titles, with new books coming out every month. It seems only a shortage of adjectives in the English language will slow the publishing of these books.

I have no argument with the series itself, but what is it telling us about the human condition? Obviously chicken soup is most often thought of as a home-remedy for an illness. With the huge popularity of these books, it is obviously that American culture is sick at heart, and they are looking for a homespun cure (which treats the symptom but not the cause)

The church has more to offer than warm broth.

You and I have come together in this place because we know that the church is not a worn and tattered sign of days-gone-by, but a beacon of light shining into the future, bringing hope and good news. Thank God for the good and faithful followers of Jesus Christ from the past and present who continue to spread that message, because they have and will be a light in the darkness to people in need.

Whether the end of the time is tomorrow or in 200 years, the church has a message to share, and Jesus never sent His followers out to preach the message of the apocalypse. Jesus never sent His disciples out to scare people into heaven. Jesus never sent His apostles off by themselves to the living room with a devotional magazine.

Jesus sent them, in pairs, out into the world, to spread the good news of the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

.... “to heal the sick....”

What illness can the church heal these days? Certainly we can pray for healing of all kinds of physical illnesses, but we should also know that God has gifted doctors and nurses to bring healing for physical illness as well. Certainly we can pray for emotional healing for those who suffer from mental illnesses, and hopefully we realize that there too doctors and nurses can bring healing. But aside from physical illness, aside from clinical mental illness, is there not a third category of illness: the soul, the spirit, the essence of humanity, damaged not by chemical imbalance or broken bone, but by human sin.

The healing we offer is not from our own power or ability, it does not come from ourselves at all. It comes from the one who came from heaven to earth. It is through the life and example of Jesus Christ that we are able to bridge the gap between one another. We meet each other ultimately at the cross of Calvary, blood brothers and sisters not from the work of our hands, but His.

How do we find one another? How do we put ourselves into the position to be heard? We could walk around with signs raised overhead, shouting that the end is near, but what good would that truly do? We could come and sit patiently through yet another sermon on a Sunday morning and leave again feeling comforted and upheld, but what good would that truly do for the world at large? A well-known Christian outreach program seeks to share the Gospel to youth by going to where the youth are and getting involved in their lives first. By meeting them where they are and caring for them and demonstrating Christian love for them, they hope to (what they call) “earn the right to be heard.”

The idea is simple enough. When the youth realize that someone cares for them enough to spend time with them, to talk with them and listen to them, suddenly the youth are interested in hearing what they have to say.

Our Logos program here seeks to do something similar - the Logos program seeks to build relationships with children and Youth so that we teach the Gospel not just with words but with actions. The Interfaith Hospitality Network - IHN - where the church opens its doors to families who would otherwise be homeless - the guests who are served through that program see the church in action, they see a church that cares enough about them to help in their time of need. Can you think of people you know - friends, neighbors, co-workers - who do not have a church family? Can you think of people you know who perhaps have given up on the church? How can you show them that you care for them because they too are children of God? I'm here to tell you that you can, through the power of the Holy Spirit that is even now at work in your hearts.

Well I am going to suggest something very bold. I suggest that you pray about it. And I don't mean “pray about it” in that way that allows us to delay action until we see some bush burning but not being consumed before we feel like we have to act. I suggest that you ask God to show you opportunities to help friends, neighbors, co-workers - even strangers and enemies. Pray that God will keep your eyes and heart open to the times and places where He will open a window and let you act. It may start out slowly... it may take a few days or even a week before you start to see the opportunities, it may take even longer before you feel that you can act on them, but once you have seen the opening you must act on it, to show that the kingdom of God is near - not in a fearful threat of the end of time but in a joyful announcement of the reality of the love of God in our midst.

Start by remembering your own life and journey. Who are the people who have lived the faith and touched your life? How did they make the love and grace of God known to you? Then follow their example and try to do the same for others.

Call it being in the Christmas spirit ahead of time, tell people that the Associate Pastor dared you to stick your nose out and tell people you care about them, tell them that God has blessed you and you want to be a blessing to others. Find any excuse to act, but act - and when the time is right, let the motivation for your action be known. Let them know that God is important to you and they are important to God. It doesn't have to be pious, it doesn't have to be contrived, let it come from the heart, your heart, which is even now being transformed by the love of God.

The church of Jesus Christ is still alive and demonstrating the love of God, still changing lives for the good of the Kingdom of God by sharing the good news - Jesus Christ came to save sinners, and He succeeded. That is a powerful message that can transform the lives of people around you, people you know and people you don't know. Can you believe it? Can you believe that God can still perform miracles and touch lives? Can you? I'm here to tell you that you can....

The more important question, and the question that you have to answer for yourself, is "Do you?"

May God strengthen each and every one of us to better follow Him and be a light for His love and peace each day.