

that helps us be present in our bodies, all of those things can be ways we try to keep awake to God and the world.

The second instruction is to go about the work of service and discipleship that we are called to do. Don't be asleep on the job when a big moment of God's presence arrives. This has often been heard as a threat, but I think it is simply healthy instruction. Whatever good work God has called us to do in the big picture of life, we ought to be doing it. That includes the marks of discipleship meant for all of us: loving God, loving neighbor, loving self. And also the unique callings of each of our lives: leadership, parenting, care giving, volunteering, serving, working for change in the world. God has called us for a purpose; gifted us with skills and talents to share. So the right way to be a disciple is to use those gifts to fulfill our purpose and callings.

In colonial New England during another solar eclipse, one legislator lived out this practical guidance to be focused on service. As a commentator tells it, as darkness descended in the middle of the day "legislators panicked and several moved to adjourn [their session.] But one of them said, 'Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought.'"³ And with the light of a few candles, they carried on with their service to their fellow citizens.

So what do we takeaway from this challenging passage?

Jesus keeps us humble—we cannot fully know what God is up to now, or in the future. But we do know that God's plans are for good, for gathering people in, for saving us from the perils of this life, for promising that gift to people in every corner of the earth.

Jesus ensures we are prepared. Prepared for the goodness God is ushering in, even though things in the meantime remain challenging. We're to be fully present and awake to all of it. So that we can serve our neighbors. So that we can live into our high calling as disciples.

Let us go out into this fifth week of Lent, with Jesus' instructions ringing in our ears, with our eyes and hearts awake to the world around us, and with our hands and feet engaged in the ministries God has called us to do.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

March 17, 2024

Fifth Sunday in Lent

"Aware, Awake, Engaged"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 13:1-8, 24-37

On April 8, more than a hundred thousand people are expected to descend on the town of Kerrville, Texas to watch the solar eclipse. Every hotel room and Airbnb for miles is said to be sold out. Kerrville is the U.S. location that expects the longest duration of darkness, about four minutes and 25 seconds, while the moon completely blots out the sun. When the last solar eclipse happened in 2017, I lived in Kentucky, not too far from the path of totality, or the greatest duration of darkness. I remember going outside with the coworkers at my church, donning our eclipse glasses, and looking up to view the amazing sight. I was a little panicky about making sure we used the glasses properly so no one went blind. What I remember most was how nature responded, even in those few short minutes. As the moon began to pass over the sun, shadows lengthened. In the darkness, cicadas started chirping and a few fireflies even came out.

Lots of people coming to Kerrville are excited to share that kind of amazing celestial experience with friends and family. But many others are drawn there by their religious beliefs. Some years ago, a giant steel cross was installed at the top of a hill in a park in Kerrville, which is called the Coming King Sculpture Prayer Garden. Apparently, a segment of folks are convinced that the occurrence of eclipse totality at the site of this cross is indicative of the end of times. One writer, who has not only bought into the eclipse hype, but also to Christian Nationalism writes "I believe God is giving our nation a final warning with this eclipse phenomenon, before Christ's return to earth at the end of time."¹

For millennia, people have tried to read signs in the cosmos about the end of the world. Needless to say, they've all been wrong. Their thinking has involved the misuse or misreading of scripture to make claims about Jesus' return to earth. Too often, those claims have scapegoated certain groups of people or blamed particular events for forcing God's hand to rain down destruction and bring about the end of times. The passage we read in Mark is one of those that has been abused in these ways. The pictures it paints are apocalyptic in nature.

1 Post with no author listed, "Eclipses converge at Texas Cross - Did God mark the spot?" The Coming King Foundation, https://thecomingkingfoundation.org/eclipses-converge-at-texas-cross-did-god-mark-the-spot/?fbclid=IwAR2G_qYilgbsqeG4SKtfEN3_YTTAKZEe7ACbbIwHBUm3afXSNdVrQg7hgN8

2 David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Mark, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2014), 194.

3 Qtd. in Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Interpretation: Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 242.

Jesus himself references the end that is still to come. But understanding this kind of literature faithfully requires much more than a surface-level reading.

The thing to remember as we look at this passage is that this was Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. Here, he had already entered the city of Jerusalem. The controversy with religious leaders had come to a boiling point, and his arrest was near. The event of Jesus' passion, which includes his crucifixion, is close. So these words that we find so strange and confusing were Jesus' way of preparing his disciples for his departure from this life. In other gospels, Jesus' farewell address includes the love commandment and instructions to go out and spread his message. But in Mark's telling of the story, Jesus offered this vision of tribulation and a reminder to look ahead to God's ultimate purposes. He promised that the future would include Jesus' emergence in the world in a new way. But he was most concerned with how to live in the meantime.

As a farewell address to his friends and followers, Jesus was not trying to offer a stargazing map or some kind of checklist to know for certain when God was going to be up to something big. Jesus was offering them guidance for how to live as disciples, with hope for what was yet to come. As commentator David Schnasa Jacobson writes, this passage is "a future vision whose power is the way it impacts us in the present."² The disciples' now was different from ours, but all of us live in the meantime: in the midst of wars, earthquakes, famines, and breathtaking cosmic events, still anticipating God's ultimate coming to set the world right.

Jesus began with warnings. Bad things will happen in the world. Jerusalem would be invaded and the Jewish temple was going to be destroyed. There's debate about whether this had already happened when Mark wrote Jesus' story down, some 30-40 years after the crucifixion. We don't know the exact date of Mark's writing, but we do know that invasion and the destruction of the temple did come to pass. In our own time, we are well acquainted with terrible things happening in our world, too. In addition to war and natural disasters, we face a new kind of terror with climate change. And there is no excuse for us not acting on or not taking that threat seriously, or any other incident of disaster or human-caused destruction. Jesus says events like these, and maybe even cosmic events, are the beginning of the birth pangs. Meaning they are signs of change, of new life emerging. Which does not mean we should welcome tragedies. And it does not mean we should ever simply accept them as they are. Our call is always to work toward peace, justice, and love for our neighbors. As we witness such events beyond our control, we can also be assured that God is still at work in the world. Jesus urges us to live in hope for what God is doing and will do.

But in the midst of that, Jesus said, don't get caught up with people who use those events to lead others astray. Don't be fooled by people who claim

to be Christ himself. Don't be taken in by those who teach that an eclipse means that God is up to some very specific thing. None of us are so wise as to understand God's exact time line or plans. Jesus said he didn't even know God's plan. Which is a strange thing to say for someone who was fully God. But I think we can take his point that God is in charge and if any of us claim to have knowledge beyond human understanding, then we really don't have a clue.

So, beware. Beware of people who claim to know more than they do. Be aware of the things on earth that cause destruction and harm. But know that what is coming some day, though all of that, is something very, very good. It will be God's arrival to bring mercy and justice and love in a complete way. It will be the Son of Man coming in clouds with glory. That term, Son of Man, serves to confuse us even more. But let's understand it as Jesus the Christ, or the savior, or God's own self come among us for saving purposes. The promise is that God will send out angels to gather the elect from every direction and every corner of earth and heaven. People will be drawn to God to be with God. And look closely. Jesus makes no mention of a corresponding group of people who will be punished or who are not part of that elect. All we hear about is God choosing to call people together. So, as we just said, let us not presume anything else except what Jesus declared: God's intention is for goodness, gathering, saving.

Finally, knowing that all that is to come, Jesus gave some final instructions. Keep awake, pay attention, keep your eyes open, because we cannot predict when the gathering in of God's beloved people will take place. And presumably, we'd like to know and experience that fully when it happens. Not out of fear, but out of joy! As Jesus' parting words, all of this is important. These thoughts ought to shape our living right now, in addition, of course, to all his other teachings. So there are two main pieces to his instructions: First, be alert, keep awake. And second, while you do that, always be focused on your discipleship.

As to being alert and awake, our current cultural moment similarly urges us to be present. Turn off our phones. Take in what is happening around us. Notice the beauty of creation. Realize the goodness of the people around you, even though we are all flawed humans. Too often, many of us are focused on our productivity, or we're just going through the motions. Or we are pulled into the digital world and find it hard to be present in the real community around us. The advice to be aware and awake, present to what is truly happening around us, and who is around us, is good advice. Just one chapter later, the disciples will prove that they didn't understand this advice, when they fall asleep while Jesus was praying in the garden. It's not an easy task to pay attention and stay aware of the world, especially in the hardest moments. Mindfulness techniques, prayer practices, breathing that grounds us, exercise