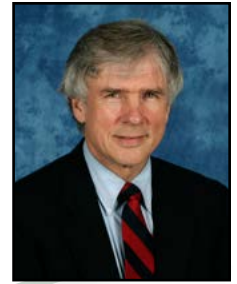




# Hear the Word

from Pastor Timothy T. Weber



Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send

## First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2017

### Keeping Watch for the One Watching Over You

Mark 13:24-37

Although this is the first Sunday of Advent, we are on the cusp of Christmas, so a few nibbles of what is forthcoming won't hurt. Two little boys were eagerly anticipating Christmas morning. As the dawn barely broke, they both ran downstairs and tore into presents they saw under the tree. The first boy ripped open the beautiful box, looked inside only to find what looked like horse poop and wailed, "What kind of present is this!" The second boy opened his beautiful box, and to his surprise finding the same looking poop, exclaimed with excitement, "Where's the pony?" They see the same thing, smell the same thing, feel the same thing...but wind up in two different places—one ends in despair, the other waits in hope.

This little vignette is a small doorway into a much bigger story which we find in today's Gospel from Mark 13. We make a mistake here if we conclude that the point is simply "be positive." That's a nice idea, but it's not the heart of the Gospel. To really live in this tough world, we need something much stronger, wiser, steadier, powerful, more loving, more enduring...than simply positivity. Positivity is like watching a Christmas Hallmark movie and believing that's really the way things are. If we open our eyes, what hits us?

Poop is putting it mildly. We live in a tough world, a hard world, an uncertain world. Sometimes the challenges seem to be much more than we ever imagined, much more than we can endure. Yes, we all indeed have experiences of grace and joy. But more and more it seems like we have less and less assurance. There is an unsettled feeling that things are becoming unglued, losing our center. Strange and weird happenings seem to surround us. Increasingly, people who aren't even religious wonder if these are the end times. Consider these things: A newspaper headline—"End times are near. Rare two headed rattlesnake found in Arkansas." In a recent survey measuring stress in America, 59% of the respondents said that the United States is at the lowest point in history they can remember. William Doherty from the University of Minnesota wrote a piece entitled "Is There Hope for A Divided America?" His research put him in touch with a dark emotional polarization in families and amongst friends—cutting off from dear ones because of their political choices, one son calling his parents to say they were no longer his parents because of how they voted. Many say the world feels like a hostile environment with so many feeling powerless and victimized. Groups are organized more by external rage than anything else. As one writer said, "Group victimization has become the global religion." If this weren't enough, there's more. Terror penetrates the globe, unleashing destruction from high rises to hamlets across the landscape—bombs and bullets shatter lives in full

bloom. If this weren't enough, there's more. It seems like there has been one natural disaster a week across the planet—hurricanes in Florida and Texas, earthquakes in Mexico, fires ripping through communities lighting up the night skies across the entire West and instantly erasing homes that have stood for years. This church sits on a fault line that many say is overdue. And then there are the many piercing, painful, and unspeakable losses and disruptions within our families, shattering our security and taking out the floor under us. People will say "I never expected our lives to come to this."

Why begin Advent this way? Why spoil the spirit of the season with doom and gloom? We have festive opportunities, good music, concerts and productions, colorful parties, frosted cookies. Why this? Well, blame Jesus for being the party pooper since he always seems to go the heart of our humanity with a truthful assessment of our real condition. In the assigned Gospel lesson for this first Sunday in Advent from Mark 13, Jesus paints a rather grim picture of things. Listen to Jesus speak to his disciples about what they should look forward to. He says, "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." The light will be gone, the stars will fall, and heaven will collapse. Merry Christmas! Jesus piles it on. Earlier in chapter 13, he tells the disciples that as tough as their world is, it will become worse—Jerusalem, the very center of their world, stunning symbol of their hopes and dreams, that iconic heart of the people—will be toppled. Jesus amps up the pain, saying to his disciples as he looks at the temple, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Essentially, it's like Jesus is warning the World Trade Center will crumble into a pile of dust. Pronouncements like this can get you killed, and in fact that's what happened to Jesus. But that's Good Friday. Jesus is not finished. He tells the disciples hey will soon go through wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, beatings, betrayal, death. Can you imagine hearing all this?! All that we have built up is dust. Heaven and earth will pass away...but "my words will not pass away" which translated means: the presence of God with us will never disappear.

Because of all these dire warnings and devastations, Mark 13 is often called "The Little Apocalypse." The word "apocalypse" typically refers to biblical writings that depict devastation, disasters, the clash of evil and good forces, pessimism around available solutions, forms of tribulation and suffering, and a movement toward the end of all things. And all these warnings are usually couched in dramatic imagery and colorful symbols—like two headed snakes. Apocalyptic narratives usually arise in difficult, impossible times when things seem to be coming apart. When things begin to unravel in our lives, it seems like the runaway train will never stop. Because of the oppression of the people, the Biblical books of Daniel and Revelation are saturated with apocalyptic images as in Mark 13, our Gospel. Interestingly, the dire warnings of Mark 13 take place on Tuesday of Holy Week—within a couple of days, Jesus will face unspeakable betrayal, torture, and brutal execution. The celebration and security of Palm Sunday for Jesus will give way to the horror of terror. There's no way around it—we occupy this hazardous space called the world and our lives. In October, the New York Times had a lengthy piece on how anxiety is saturating the world of young adults and severely handicapping their hopes. So, what should we do? Here are seven ineffective ways people use to try to escape all this...all very popular, but none with staying power to carry us.

1. Run for the hills and take your money with you.
2. Narcotize yourself through multiple addictions, substances, activities—if you're numb, you won't feel it.
3. Join the optimist society that looks for the pony whenever you smell the poop.
4. Attach yourself to a group that is enraged by the opposition so that you can focus your fear into anger toward the other.
5. Circle the wagons and try to keep all the bad things out of your own little world, crossing your finger and changing your passwords.
6. Become a tribal fanatic of something, wear your team jersey, paint your face, let your existence hinge on wins and losses for things that essentially have no impact on your life.
7. Constantly work, clean, remodel, redecorate, and repair your body and your home as if everything depended on

it—you won't think about much more. Can any of these things trick us enough to calm our fears and steady our lives with confidence? Henri Nouwen writes about this: "We are afraid of our emptiness. We like to occupy-fill up—every empty time and space. We want to be occupied. And if we are not occupied we easily become preoccupied; that is we fill the empty spaces before we have even reached them. We fill them with our worries...It is very hard to allow emptiness to exist in our lives. Emptiness requires a willingness not to be in control, a willingness to let something new and unexpected happen. It requires trust, surrender, and openness to guidance. God wants to dwell in our emptiness."

Will you allow God, pregnant with promise, the source of love, to enter the deep waters of your life? The despair of the apocalyptic visions underscore our failed attempts and the end of our energy. What does it take for us to break and receive a salvation that is beyond our creation? Most often we break not because of our choice, but because the crises of life have worn us to the bone, broken our soul, and left us empty. Have you been there? Apocalypses amplify negative news that becomes bigger and bigger, warning about the end of all things, and underscoring our essential incapacity. A true apocalypse leaves us empty, facing the naked truth about ourselves. A line from the hymn *Amazing Grace* speaks to this "breaking down and waking up" process of grace. Listen:—"twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." Grace leads us to encounter our lives as they really are—the fear, the reality, that we are much smaller than we thought. And then grace, at the same time, invites us into a new world where we meet the God who made us, the Lord who lifts us into love, and the Spirit who heals our broken hearts. Grace meets us where we truly are, but does not leave us where it found us.

So, what is the real purpose of apocalyptic writing? The word "apocalypse" refers to disaster and despair, but literally means "unveiling" or "revealing." Three hidden truths are unveiled through these images. First, the truth of the danger, darkness, and fragility of life is magnified. Second, the truth of our inability, incapacity, and limits is underscored. Third, the truth of needing to be delivered by One outside of us, beyond our control, is illuminated. There is much to study in apocalyptic writings, perhaps some other time.

However this one point needs to be stated: These apocalyptic passages through the Bible are not intended to be prophecy crystal balls and predictions of the future. A lot of attention, especially during the last 200 years has been given to mapping out the future using the biblical road map. Even Yogi Berra once said prediction is difficult, especially when it's about the future. In short, the stark and dramatic images in apocalyptic literature refer to present circumstances, not future imaginations. The weight of the present world bears down on our hopes and spirits—and that is the focal point of apocalyptic literature. We are headed the wrong way if we get excited about prophecy and prediction. The theologian Barbara Rossing believes that part of the reason people are so fascinated by prophecy signs and images and rapture stories is that "we Christians have not been passionate or urgent enough in telling our stories (living our stories) of seeing God and the Lamb alive in the world." There is an urgency not to get tangled in the stories of earthquakes, but rather to lift up and live out the story of THE BIRTHQUAKE—the baby of Bethlehem, the Lord of the Cross, and the Christ of Easter. The birthquake arrives now.

The Lord of this story has the power to invade our lives, to lift us up when our lives have been broken in sorrow, to gradually show us a new path, to lead us into courage so that we might see what cannot be seen and do what cannot be done. When all is lost, we are found. When all we hear is noise, the bells of Bethlehem ring loud. When our hands are tied, our lives are carried in the arms of God. When darkness descends all around, the light streaks through and signals there is something more. And the only command in our Gospel story to us from Jesus...stated five times no less, is to do this: **KEEP WATCH!** In the Bible keeping watch is often linked to prayer. Prayer is being absorbed into the life of God, so that when we keep watch, we watch for the right stuff, what matters most, what will save us instead of what will distract us.

There are many stories about Luther and trees. He delighted in them. The fresh spring green of the trees was for him a symbol of the resurrection of the dead. In the trees he experienced divine grace in earthly life. Luther had confidence in the One who watches over us when he said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant an apple tree today.” The gift of the Spirit is this quiet confidence, sourced in the deep love of God. Quiet confidence is being in the midst of thundering noise and still hearing the sweet music. This quiet confidence allows us to proceed in simplicity and courage, allowing us to trust that God might be up to something, poking holes in our darkness in unexpected ways. An example:

Seventeen years ago I was in a fight, a fight along with others in a group I was in, against two individuals who, it was felt, had betrayed the group, but were defending themselves. These two people had befriended me a lot when I came to Seattle in 1988. They opened their home, connected me with opportunities, supported me with love. I was grateful. But things changed over time as they often do. Friends can turn into strangers, trust flips into fear, care vanishes and resentments fill the air. Finally these two people were extruded from the group—tense, sad, tough, tearful times. Months later, I tried to contact them; they didn’t return my calls. Finally I stopped calling. Sometimes we just give up; not everything can be fixed. Then, out of the blue, a couple of months ago, 17 years later, I received an email from these two people with a question, “Are you interested in reconnecting?” That was about it. I could have considered the following: Too little, too late. After the way I was treated, of course not. I already made attempts once, now you have to come apologizing. And so on. The darkness has power. So, I emailed them back. I actually didn’t want to call them—felt like too much. I emailed them with a yes...yes, let’s meet for dinner...and I volunteered to pay for the dinner, not knowing what restaurant they would pick..and, I said, I wanted to pay for dinner because I wanted to thank them for all they had done for me in years past...skipping entirely any reference to our falling apart. We agreed to meet for dinner. For days I wondered what might happen, who would bring up what, would we revisit those dark days of conflict? Lot of uncertainty. For a moment I thought this might be a big waste of time. And then the time came, we greeted each other near the door of restaurant, smiled, hugged each other and sat down. We looked anxiously at the menu, small talked as we checked in about what we currently were up to. And then we drifted back into history, the breakup, the conflicts, the tears. Maybe that’s why Jesus had so many meetings over meals. Our meal, it seems, began to soften things a bit. We talked about our regrets, how hard it had been, failures to appreciate the gifts of each other, remorse for what we had missed, and so on. We shared some common experiences of what it feels to be cast out and pushed away and forgotten as if you didn’t ever exist—painful. This was a small beginning we had together. Some apology, some confessions, some regrets. Coming into this encounter I was concerned. But, it helped me to remind myself that this was God’s table not mine. I was going to be a guest at God’s table. The tough times belong to God, and we are called to allow God to work within us and through us when we are lost, when we are uncertain, when we are resistant, when we fear, when we can’t move. When it all seems impossible, lift up your head and keep watch for the hand of love and the surprise of God who is up to something and is ready to lead you in ways you never thought were possible. What, when, how—as Jesus said, No one knows. God’s ways are beyond our mapping. We don’t need to know the future. We just need to be open to God who is the future.

Listen, as we close, to a few words from the French theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin from his prayer “Patient Trust”: “Above all, trust in the slow work of God/.We are quite naturally impatient in everything/to reach the end without delay/.We should like to skip the intermediate stages/.We are impatient of being on the way to something/unknown, something new/.... it may take a very long time./...Only God could say what this new spirit/gradually forming within you will be./Give Our Lord the benefit of believing/that his hand is leading you,/and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself/ in suspense and incomplete./—.....So, keep watch always for the One who is always watching you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.