

“Don’t Panic”  
Mark 13:24-37

You better watch out, you better not cry, better not pout, I'm telling you why: Jesus Christ is coming to town. If you are not scared by my singing, you might be scared by some of the prophecies about the coming of Jesus and not just as a baby but as the one who will end our time on earth. In 1999 the late Rev. Jerry Falwell predicted that Jesus could return within ten years. So, the clock is ticking! But before that can happen, he said that the Antichrist must appear. Referring to the Antichrist, Falwell said: "Is he alive and here today? Probably. Because when he appears during the Tribulation period he will be a full-grown counterfeit of Christ. Of course, he'll be Jewish. Of course, he'll pretend to be Christ. And if in fact the Lord is coming soon, and he'll be an adult at the presentation of himself, he must be alive somewhere today." This is one of the thousands of predictions about the end of the world and the second coming of Christ. It is interesting to see who has made it to the list of predictions about the Antichrist. Here are some of the names for you: Jimmy Carter, Bill Gates, John Kennedy, Henry Kissinger, Martin Luther, Ronald Reagan, Saddam Hussein, and David Rockefeller. How did people come up with these names? They followed some of the signs very literally. John F. Kennedy for example was named the Antichrist because he received 666 votes at the 1956 Democratic Convention, and later died of a head wound. A head wound is significant to those looking to determine who is the beast or Antichrist because of the description of the beast from the sea in Revelation 13:1-3. "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads... One of its heads seemed to have received a death blow, but its mortal wound has been healed." Ronald Wilson Reagan, was named the Antichrist because each of his names has six letters, and he recovered from a near-fatal shooting.

My favorite answer to all the predictions about the end of the world is the one that comes from the creator of the Peanuts comic strip, Charles Schultz, "Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia." So, don't panic!

It is amazing to see how many people are obsessed with the end of the world with books, movies, sermons and serious timelines around this topic. It all started with the misunderstanding of certain biblical passages known as apocalyptic literature. What most of these readers miss is that these passages were written for the people at the time and not in an effort to predict the future after 2000 years. The word "apocalypse" simply means "unveiling" or "uncovering." This kind of understanding which is often called Premillennial Dispensationalism and which the Scofield Reference Bible advocates is a fairly modern invention, originating with the Englishman, John Darby in the early 19th century. It was popularized by Scofield, whose introduction and especially footnotes in his edition of the King James Version proved immensely influential among many Christians who made little or no distinction between the authority of the text of scripture and the notes. Dispensationalism became a mainstream phenomenon with Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970 and, more recently, with Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* book series.

Our Bible reading for today is one of those passages that often gets misunderstood as a literal prediction of the end of times. When Jesus talks about all these events that will happen before "this generation" passes away, our dispensationalist friends take it to mean a certain generation in the future. While in fact, the obvious meaning of "this generation" is the generation contemporary with Jesus. The Gospel of Mark was written around the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, so some of the events that are described in the passage had already

taken place during that time. The people were suffering because they had to leave their homes. Their temple was destroyed. The Roman Empire was oppressing them. It was indeed the end of the world as they knew it. This was all caused by human cruelty and injustice. There is no reference in this passage or any other apocalyptic passage to sufferings and tribulations of the world being caused by God's vengeance. Suffering is caused by wars, frauds, natural disasters, misunderstandings and persecutions. These are predictable human failings that cause human misery without any divine intervention.

So, if this passage is not about panicking and getting our lives in order before Christ comes again, what is it about? I think the key to the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter in the Gospel of Mark is the phrase "Keep watch/awake." This one phrase is repeated three times in the short span of our story for today. This was the key point that Jesus was trying to make. This was an important theme in the Gospel of Mark where the disciples over and over again didn't get the message of Jesus. They often misunderstood or even totally missed what Jesus was trying to say or do. So, their invitation and ours today is to "keep watch/awake." And we keep watch because Christ is coming to us today and every day. The promise that Jesus gave to the disciples that he was going to be with them till the end of the age is still being fulfilled here with us even today. Our work is not to hasten the coming of Christ. Our work is to be watchful, and to be awake because Christ comes to us every day. It is just that we are not paying attention. This is the season of Advent and the key idea for Advent is waiting and watching. We wait in intentional ways during this season because we are paying attention and we know that Christ is coming to us in our daily life.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk and teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn wrote the following in his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, "In Buddhism, our effort is to practice mindfulness in each moment-to know what is going on within and all around us. When the Buddha was asked, 'Sir, what do you and your monks practice?' he replied, 'We sit, we walk, and we eat.' The questioner continued, 'But sir, everyone sits, walks, and eats,' and the Buddha told him, 'When we sit, we *know* we are sitting. When we walk, we *know* we are walking. When we eat, we *know* we are eating.' Most of the time, we are lost in the past or carried away by future projects and concerns. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy. When our beautiful child comes up to us and smiles, we are completely there for her. (*Living Buddha, Living Christ*; p. 14)

Our hope during this time of Advent comes because we know that Christ's coming was not an event that took place 2000 years ago in a faraway place. Our hope comes because we know that Christ is coming to us each and every day. We are invited to pay attention to those times, people, and events that bring us the presence of Christ. All the scary stuff about the end of times is another delusion which we created as human beings to take our focus off the important task of paying attention to God's presence in our midst in the present moment. Advent is an invitation to keep watch, to open our eyes and hearts to the presence of the one who comes to us in many guises.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times that there were only five monks left: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot to ask the rabbi if he could offer any advice. The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how

it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save the monastery?"

The rabbi said "No, I have no advice. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you." When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant." In the days and weeks that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. And the speculation went on and on. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. And slowly as people came to the monastery to meditate and visit, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality.

Our hope is in knowing that Christ comes to each of us! Keep watch, Christ is coming to town!