

**Mark 13: 1-8, 14-19 “Always Near the End” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/24/24**

**As a family sat down for lunch after Sunday worship, the teenager at the table had some questions about the sermon which was on the second coming of Christ. The mom and dad tried their best to answer him, but after awhile the dad finally concluded by saying, “We don’t have all the answers we might like, but we do have all we need to know. The best preparation is simply to live each day as if it were your last.” “I tried that once,” the teen replied, “but you grounded me for a month.” So I can imagine at least some of you are here this morning because you were hoping to take an hour off from the news and headlines. It’s not that you don’t care, most of you are deeply involved in the world. Thus, you are definitely allowed, as Barbara Brown Taylor notes, to sneak away into a quiet, restful place where no one yells (not even you), where the music and décor are beautiful, and where you can count on there being some order to things, setting you free to open your heart to the Divine Presence and Author of Love – something which is often hard to find elsewhere.**

**Church is a reassuring place, in the midst of so much upheaval and chaos. This communion table came from Sherri L’s dad in Bakersfield over 60 years ago where it had been used by a church prior to that, so it’s at least 75 years old. Decades of faithful followers have come to this table to be nourished through troubled times. The Lord’s prayer, which we pray every Sunday has been around for a couple millenium, and its origin can be found in the Hebrew Amidah prayer from which Jesus adapted, so it even precedes Jesus’ day. And the God to whom we pray has been around a whole lot longer than that. One of religion’s central functions is to provide this kind of continuity to people whose lives are fragile and short. Even if you live to the ripe old age of 100 like Marion V, you won’t last as long as the handmade wooden bookshelves Jim B. made for my office. Whenever I pull a book off the shelf, I’m aware of its incredible sturdiness which will far outlast my time here with you. Maybe that is what draws us here this morning – hoping to deepen our ties to the eternal God, who can give fragile people like us something to hold onto when the headlines howl, the rains flood our neighborhood, and the earth moves under our feet. If you have come looking**

for some sanctuary from the world outside, I'm afraid today's not your day, thanks to the scripture we encounter from the tail end of our church season called Pentecost.

Somehow the world outside didn't seem so negative to me when I was growing up, but maybe it was just my naivete. I do remember being taught to hide under my desk in first grade, in the late 60's, in case of nuclear attack, believing that would protect me somehow; a small wooden desk vs. a nuclear bomb? But as I have grown older, I better understand the words of social activist Adrienne Maree Brown writing in reference to racial justice in 2016 who said, "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil." Today's scripture seeks to do just that – to uncover what has been hidden and encourage us to hold each other tight. Not in the ways that the Left Behind series has attempted, which has failed to explain the role of this type of literature in the Bible and therefore misinterpreted the signs, but in the ways Jesus meant for these references to be understood. The powerful fascination people have towards the end times has led people to not just focus on American politics but the state of the Middle East for signs that the end-time alarm clock is about to ring. What's more, a significant number of those same people are willing to do whatever it takes to help move the hands of that clock forward, even, if they have to yank on them a little bit. Unlike Jesus' disciples, who prompted Jesus' doomsday speech by asking him for signs of the end times, these people are pretty sure they already know what those signs are. They have studied the scriptures, kept up with the headlines, and done the math. While different groups have come up with significantly different answers, what they have in common is their dedication to not being left behind when the time comes. Additionally, there is the profession that they alone know exactly what is required of anyone who wants to go with them to meet their Lord in the air. This doesn't make these folks bad people, although their certainty about who is evil and who is good makes them pretty scary people, but in light of this morning's text, I think they may have misunderstood Jesus' message. Along the way, they may also be missing something essential about the nature of faith. It's not hard to do. When you are

listening to Jesus talk about the signs of the end times, it's easy to believe that he's offering you clues to a puzzle that you should be able to solve. As Woody Allen once said, "If only God would give me a clear sign like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank, then I would know for sure."

What might such signs be in the text? Let's go back and review. Should we figure out what the desolating sacrilege is that isn't supposed to be there and where it has been set up, then figure out which mountains we are going to flee to – Siskiyou, Sierras, Trinity Alps? Then figure out how to tell the real Messiah from the false ones, and real prophets from imposters. Then dedicate ourselves to staying awake until the alarm goes off, without getting distracted by all the mundane needs and griefs of everyday life. Because we have done our homework, because we have paid attention, because we have trimmed our wick while more fragile people have fallen asleep, maybe we can avoid getting sucked down the drain when the time comes. God knows I understand that wish; I even understand how it is possible for folks to hear Jesus commending such actions. Some of you may remember the Y2K scare which led people to stock their houses full of emergency gear, food, and water, in the event that the changing over of computers to the double zero year would create instability on such a global scale that chaos and destruction would prevail. But it did not, and when I listen again to our text, I hear Jesus saying something closer to the exact opposite of the "left behind" crowd...something more like this: *"Give it up, everyone. I know you're scared, and when you get scared, the first thing you want to do is run back to where you once felt safest. Go back to the world the way it used to be. Go back to church where no one ever asked you to self-reflect or open your mind to new ideas. But there's no going back. When God's time comes, there's no going back. When God's time comes, you won't have time to grab a coat. All those cans of beans in the pantry are going to rust right where they are. All that cash you stashed away is going to mildew. God will shorten the suffering, but the rest is out of your hands. So don't be led astray by people who pretend they know a secret way out. God's future is not a puzzle you can solve, any more than life's a game you can win by making all the right*

***moves.***” I hear Jesus’ voice speaking to us with genuine concern that we are wasting our lives in an unending cycle of fear, scrambling to grab hold of anything we can control and manipulate to our advantage. But Jesus says, “No, that isn’t the way. That will only lead to disappointment and anger.”

In later verses, Jesus says, “False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens to lead you astray. But be alert; I have already told you everything.” In other words, Jesus has provided all the information we need. There will always be people who believe faith requires them to be certain about everything that God has in store, and to gain every advantage they can by trying to figure it all out ahead of time. Yet it is entirely possible that faith is closer to the exact opposite of that. Faith is more about continuing to live in the ways we have been taught to live, focused on love more than fear, even though we can’t be certain of anything with regards to the future. Faith is about remembering what Jesus has been teaching us all along in his ministry, like the part about always loving God with your whole heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Or the part about being the salt of the earth or treating the least of these as if they were Jesus himself. Or about trusting God, even though the waves threaten to swamp the boat. The only certainty we have is that the future, our future and the world’s future, can always be entrusted to God. God is the midwife and what God births will never lead to desolation. Things are getting uncovered so we must hold onto each other tight and continue to pull back the veil... pull back the veil of injustice, the veil of deception, the veil of oppression... all those veils which hide or disguise the ways in which we are to live in the face of chaos.

Next week begins the season of Advent, when even the headlines may soften a bit at what is coming upon the world. We don’t have all the answers we might like, but we do have all we need to know. It is too easy to despair, grow numb, or let exhaustion win. But it’s precisely now, when the world feels so near to the end, that we have to respond with resilient, healing love as Jesus would. Something is struggling to be born. It is true the birth pangs will hurt but rest assured, they will end in joy. So hold each other tight, and allow the veil to part.