

“Lo, He Comes...”

Mark 13:24-27

²⁴ “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” (ESV)

Today is the first Sunday of Advent according to the Christian calendar. If you’re not familiar with the word “Advent,” it means “coming.” It’s simple as that. Some people always ask, “Why are you preaching these crazy passages at Christmas time?” Advent is not just the coming of Jesus the first time in the manger, but we actually celebrate more, according to church history, the coming of Jesus the second time in glory. So, today’s passage is much more focused on Advent in that sense: Jesus coming and our hope of His coming to restore all things.

Advent starts at a different time for everybody. For my wife, I think Christmas really starts when she’s finally able to persuade me one way or the other to get out the ladder and climb up in the attic and get all the Christmas stuff down. She can’t start Christmas until that’s done. On the other hand for me, depending on what’s going on, Christmas starts about an hour or two after Thanksgiving dinner. And here’s why. For almost our whole marriage we have this tradition: we eat, we have Thanksgiving, everything is cleaned up, and then the whole family and anyone who’s having Thanksgiving dinner with us grabs blankets and pillows and goes to the living room and we watch “The Muppet Christmas Carol” together. I don’t bring a blanket, I simply bring a box of Kleenex. If you’re not familiar with the Muppet Christmas Carol or the book upon which it is based, *A Christmas Carol*, basically the template is this: You have a guy named Ebenezer Scrooge who says, “Bah, humbug.” He doesn’t believe any of it. He doesn’t have “The Christmas Spirit.” One evening three spirits come to him, the ghost of Christmas past, the ghost of Christmas present, and the ghost of Christmas yet to come. By considering his past and by considering his present and his future he realizes that he needs to celebrate Christmas. He’s a changed man. In the Muppet Carol, Kermit is Bob Cratchit and Michael Cain is Scrooge, and I love at the end when he jumps from his bed and he says, “I understand!” He says, “I will celebrate Christmas in the past and in the present and in the future.” And the reason I love that movie around this time of year is because the Christmas Carol basically is the perfect template for understanding Advent, for understanding how it should be celebrated, and for understanding what it should do in our hearts. Basically it’s this: that when we look at our past and at our future, it defines what we do in our present. That’s what happened for Scrooge. He saw Christmas past, how he’d blown it. He saw Christmas future, what his hope was (or what his duress would be) and it defined how he lived every Christmas after that. Because of that, you never saw a better man than Ebenezer Scrooge.

So as we look at today’s text we’re actually going to look at all of Mark 13 in a sense, or at least verses 1-27. We’re going to look at it in three parts. We’re going to look at it in the past, and we’re going to look at it in the future, and then in the present. In other words, we’re going to look at a past destruction and a future restoration that defines our present motivation.

What’s the past destruction you see in this text? You notice in verse 1,

¹ And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (ESV) [A photo of the Hebrew temple is shown on the screen.]

That’s a model of the temple they would have been looking at. So Jesus and His disciples have gone through the temple and as they walk out, His disciples (at least one of them) were unbelievably impressed. He says, “Teacher, look at this!” And the temple back then was more than just a great building. A Roman historian called the temple, “It’s like a mountain of marble gilded with gold.” It was one of the wonders of Roman architecture. It was built by Herod. And the disciples were awed by it because it had this great history as well, because Israel was dispersed all over the world and the temple was the place that God promised that he would gather them in from the four winds, He would bring them back together; re-gather them. So the temple was the focus and the locus of God’s presence on earth.

How does Jesus respond to their wonder at the temple? He says, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be one left here, one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” So in one heartbeat Jesus says, “Bam,” and it’s gone. How can He do that? Who does He think He is that He can just say that the center of our whole religion, the center of our whole life, the place where God meets us, the place of all the sacrifices, “You tell us that that thing is going to be destroyed?” Jesus doesn’t actually say it’s going to be destroyed, He says it’s going to be “utterly, completely, and finally destroyed.” The language He uses is from the Old Testament. He says, “There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.” That’s the language of finality. That temple, the physical thing you’re looking at, will be gone forever. How can He do that? His disciples, maybe if they had a clue they would have gotten it, because remember Jesus talked about a temple in another place as well. John chapter 2, remember Jesus cleared the temple and He drove people out and the Scribes and the Pharisees came to Him and said, “Who do you think you are? Show us a sign. Show us a sign that gives you this authority to do this.” And Jesus said, “I’ll give you a sign. Destroy this temple and in three days I’ll raise it up again.” They thought He was crazy. It doesn’t say it in the Greek, but you know some would say, “This guy is nuts. It took 46 years to build this temple and You’re telling us a) You’re going to destroy it and b) You’re going to build the whole thing again in three days.” The only way we really know what Jesus is talking about is John’s editorial comment a few verses later. He almost whispers it. “The temple He was talking about was His body.” In other words, Jesus was saying, “That temple right there is no longer where you meet God. There’s another temple.” What He said to them would have been really crazy talk, to be honest with you, because in the Ancient Near East temples were it. If you wanted to meet God or your gods, you built a temple. God was out there, you were down here, and if you wanted to meet Him you needed this place, a temple where you could go, and that is the place where heaven met earth. That is the place where the divine met with the human. That’s the place where sacrifices were made so that you could have your sins forgiven. Jesus says, “That physical building right there is going to be gone, because you don’t need it anymore. The real temple is here.” [Tommy’s arms outstretched] You see, the temple was utterly necessary to have a place where heaven and earth could meet. Jesus says, “I am the place where heaven and earth meet.” It was the place where sacrifice was made so that your sins could be forgiven, and Jesus would say over and over again, “I am the place where your sins are forgiven. I am not only the one who brings the lamb, I am the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. From the time that temple goes away for eternity, it will never be the center of God’s presence again.”

It’s amazing how much emphasis people give to the physical temple. I was watching TV the other night, flipping through channels. I came across the channel, “God TV.” I don’t watch God TV very much but it caught my attention because the preacher had a scale model of the temple grounds. It was similar to what I just showed you, an architectural model, and he was selling bricks in that temple for \$50,000 apiece. People were buying them. The motivation was, “If we can just get the temple built again, then Jesus will come back and restore all things.” What Jesus is saying is, “That temple is gone.” They might rebuild the temple, they might make it grand, and they might make it more glorious than it was before, but it will never again be the place where humanity meets God. It will never again be the place where sacrifices are made for your sins to be forgiven because Jesus is the sacrifice. Jesus is the temple. Jesus is the place where you meet with God. You need a temple, that’s for sure. The question is, “Do you have one?” There is one: Jesus, and He was crucified.

What’s interesting is that immediately after this discourse to His disciples, He is going to be crucified. So there’s some other meaning here as well. The temple will be destroyed – “like tomorrow, guys.” Jesus would go to the cross. You see, we’re very sentimental, but there’s more to looking at the past than just the manger. The past includes the destruction of the physical temple but it also includes the destruction of Jesus’ physical body. His physical body was crushed and destroyed in order that you and I might have our sins forgiven. Do you believe that? Knowing that your sins are forgiven, what does that mean for you? That should be something that defines you. Knowing your past, the temple has been destroyed and Jesus has replaced it. That temple, by the way, was destroyed in 70 A.D. You see, knowing your past and then knowing your future is going to define the present.

So what’s happening in the future? The past is the temple that’s replaced by Jesus. The temple was this place in which Israel would be gathered back together and in the future it’s the place where everybody, the nations, will be gathered. You see our future is going to define our present. Let’s look at the future real quickly.

²⁴ “*But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,* ²⁵ *and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.* ²⁶ *And then they will see the Son of*

Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” (ESV)

What’s important about this is the hope of restoration. Mark’s original audience was probably being persecuted by Nero. They were probably around when they heard stories of the temple being destroyed. It could not have gotten worse. We look around us and think, “Man, things are bad. My newspaper came at 6:30 instead of 5:30 this morning; my day is ruined.” For them it was horrible, and Jesus says, “Here’s what your future holds for you. What your future holds is the restoration of all things.” He was born lowly in a manger to a poor couple. No one thought twice about it. And then He was crucified like a common criminal and He says, “All of that stuff eventually will be restored and vindicated some day when the moon is dark and the stars fall from the heavens . . .”

By the way that’s probably not literal language. It comes from the Old Testament prophets as well, and that was the language of the changing of political authorities, whether it be Babylon or Egypt or something, that was metaphorical language. In other words, whether it is literal or not, what it probably is getting at is not to worry about all the things that worry you right now because change is coming. Have you heard that recently? You need change? You need to change the political structure. Jesus says, “That is coming.” There will be a day when the authorities who rule our land and all over the world be changed, but in fact there is coming a day when Jesus says, “I will return in all my power and all my glory and I will rule all things. And I will restore all things.”

Remember all the way back in Genesis when Adam and Eve tasted of that apple and shalom was violated? In other words things were the way things were supposed to be, but as soon as they did that, things were not the way they were supposed to be. Jesus says, “I’m coming back and things will be exactly as they are supposed to be. You can count on that. I promise.” But even more than that, notice what it says he is going to do. It says,

²⁶ . . .they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds . . . (ESV)

That was the language used of Israel. The word “elect” here is an interesting word because in the Greek it’s actually the word “*eclectoi*” from which we get the word “eclectic.” It’s a hard word to translate because it would be hard to say, “I will send my angels out to gather my diverse group of people from all different tribes, tongues, nations.” It’s a lot simpler to just say “the elect.” But that’s what’s meant there. In other words, in the past what the former temple represented was the place to which the nation of Israel would be gathered back together. And in the future when Jesus returns He’s not going to only gather those in the nation of Israel who have trusted Him, but He will gather all the nations. The past destruction of that old temple and the replacement by Jesus and the future hope of restoration define our present motivation. That’s what comes in the middle of this passage.

One commentator I read said that Mark 13 is the happy hunting grounds for people who like end-times teaching and end-times stories. And yet in this passage there’s some of the simplest text in the whole Bible as far as what our motivations are. What is our motivation in the midst of trials? Notice what Jesus says when His disciples ask,

³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”

Jesus said first, “See that no one leads you astray.” In other words, they do the same thing that we do. “Jesus is coming back—look busy” says a bumper sticker. Jesus is coming back and the disciples say, “When is it going to happen and what is it going to look like?” The first thing that Jesus says is, “Don’t be led astray.” And then notice what He says next.

⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed.

Imagine you’re sitting there and thinking, everyone’s going to die. Don’t be alarmed, He says.

⁷ . . . *This must take place, but the end is not yet.* ⁸ *For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.* ⁹ *“But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. 10 And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.*

I have an ESV Bible and the editor’s comment for the paragraph heading says, “Signs of the close of the age.” And yet a few verses later Jesus says, “When you see all these things happening it’s not the end. It’s not the close of the age.” So maybe I should write the editor or something. Jesus says, “It’s not the end when you see these things.” In fact when you’re taken before the councils and beaten, that’s not the end. You’re spending your time looking for signs of the end when in fact what you see all around you are signs of opportunity.

Every generation since Jesus has lived through trials and tribulations such that they thought no one else could understand. Right? Read the history of World War I where you see 50 and 60 thousand people die in a day. Read the history of World War II where 50 million people are killed. Step outside our border to some place like Darfur where there’s genocide. All of these things. Jesus says, “These are not the end. They’re birth pains.” But also they’re opportunities. The future and the past inform our present and they motivate us to what end? They motivate us to gather.

Did you notice why Jesus said they would be dragged before councils and they would be persecuted? The reason for that, Jesus says, is so that you might bear witness to them. The very people who are persecuting you and hate you, do that so that you can tell them the Gospel. Sound familiar? That’s life that Jesus lived. But there’s more than that. He says, “None of this will happen until the Gospel is preached to all nations.” You see at the end Jesus says, “I’m coming at the end to gather my elect from the four winds.” They can’t be gathered unless they trust Jesus in the first place. What motivates us to share Jesus with them is knowing that He will come back. When all these things happen, Jesus says, “It isn’t the end. It’s an opportunity.” You see, when trials come and tribulations come and hardships come, according to the Gospel, Christians don’t step out, but, in fact, they step up. They don’t step out, they step up.

We had a congregational meeting a few weeks ago and what did we say about giving? Because there is a financial crisis we need to step it up, not pull it back. Our deacons are receiving more requests than ever. This is an opportunity to step it up, not step back or out. The bottom line is: since we know what is coming, does that inform the way you interact with your neighbors? When you talk to your neighbors about Christmas, is it just sort of casual or do you realize that Christmas is about the coming of Jesus in the past but also in the future? In the future He comes to judge the quick and the dead. Are you quick? Do you know Christ? Jesus says, “All of these signs, all these things will happen in order that the Gospel will be preached to all the nations.” That’s our mission. If you knew that Jesus was coming back, or let me rephrase that, if you really believed He was coming back, how would that inform the way you interact with people around you. How would that inform the way you interact with people who don’t know Christ? Do you care about them? Would it change?

We watched a movie the other night that I hadn’t seen. It was all right—“Christmas with the Kranks.” Have you seen that one? “Christmas with the Kranks” has Tim Allen, whose last name is Krank. Their family is famous for doing up Christmas right. They decorate their house and have an eight-foot Frosty they put on the roof. Their daughter goes away to the Peace Corps and he decides, “I’m tired of doing all this work. I’m not going to do it anymore.” So, they decide to opt out of Christmas this year. The neighborhood is furious - everyone calls him Scrooge. Everyone hates him, and then Christmas Eve morning his daughter calls and says, “Daddy, I’m coming home tonight and I can’t wait to bring Enrique, my new fiancé to the big Krank Christmas party.” Of course, I paused it at that point and I looked at my daughters and said, “God help the man who informs me that you’re getting married by telephone.” [laughter] To which my oldest replied, “I was wondering if you were going to say something.” [laughter] Back to the story – Part of the comedy of the movie is Tim Allen and Jamie Lee Curtis trying to move heaven and earth to get things ready for their daughter to show up in about five hours’ time – to do everything they could have been doing the whole time, at the last minute. What’s the moral of the story? If he’d known his daughter was coming home, would he not have been preparing for Christmas? If he had known his daughter was coming home, would he not have found the joy in Christmas that they always had? If he’d only known – and he didn’t. The glory of the Gospel for us is that you and I know. We know that Jesus is coming back. He’s not going to call us, “Hey, it’s going to be about 6:00 tonight.” He’s coming and will we be ready? Will we be hopeful? Think about that.