

Be Still, Disciple

Westminster Presbyterian Church - Auburn

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Pulpit Supply Sermon during the Coronavirus Outbreak

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Prayer of Illumination

O God, we know that you are greater than the most powerful forces in this world, help us in this moment of trial to be still and know that you are God. As we hear your word, breathe in us your Holy Spirit to strengthen, comfort, and guide us in the midst of the storm. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Savior. **Amen.**

Introduction

On October 22, 1844, as many as 100,000 Christians gathered together on hillsides, in churches, and in fields across the country. Many had sold their homes, their land, and all of their earthly possessions. Breathlessly, they waited. Anxiously, they anticipated the return of their Savior, Jesus Christ, on that night.

These crowds had gathered because of the prophecy of a Baptist preacher named William Miller. Using calculations he had derived from Scripture, he was certain that Jesus was going to return on that day. The waiting crowds peered expectantly toward the heavens as the hours slipped away. As nightfall fell and the midnight hour tolled, their anxiety grew. Christ had not returned. Through the wee hours of the morning, the dejected and stunned crowds began to disperse, and when the daylight of October 23rd broke through, it was clear that Christ was not coming. One follower later wrote,

“I waited all that day and dear Jesus did not come; – after 12 o’clock I began to feel faint, and I needed someone to help me up to my chamber... There I lay prostrate for 2 days – sick with disappointment.”¹

Still to this day, historians call this moment of apocalyptic fervor the “Great Disappointment.”

Over recent years, we have almost come to expect these well-publicized stories of self-proclaimed prophets announcing the end of the world. So often, these prophets attract a large following, trigger a near panic, and inevitably end up wrong.

¹ A History of the Apocalypse By Catalin Negru

Yet, these apocalyptic predictions are nothing new. Martin of Tours, a very early Christian saint, wrote that he was certain the world would end by the year 400, stating - "There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born." When it didn't happen, many Christians then thought the world would end in the year 500, then 800, then 1000. A pope decreed that it would end in the year 1284, and even Martin Luther thought that his time must be in the End Times. In one of his sermons, he pointed as evidence to the feeling that there were more eclipses of the sun, more storms and tempests "as have never before been seen or heard."² Luther doesn't even mention the bubonic plague, which had been so devastating to Europe that it had killed about a third of the population at that time!

Throughout the ages, every age has thought that it was so bad that it had to be the End of the Age.

Trouble in the Text

Scripture is little help. Jesus himself said, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

But what on earth does he mean? Not helpful, Jesus. Not helpful.

And we can see by our passage today, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was filled with the fervent belief that Jesus' return was imminent. It was coming. Any day. Any moment. And yet, here we are... over 2000 years later. And since that time, from the very first followers onward, each generation has fervently believed that they must be the last generation. This is a profound mystery of our faith.

Trouble in the World

The trouble is that when we look out upon the world and on all of its brokenness, from our finite perspective, it always looks like it is at its bleakest. You simply have to watch the news - with all of its depictions of disease and COVID, of riots and insurrection, of war and terror, of death and pain, of every human depravity and fragility - and it is easy to be convinced that these times *must* be the End Times.

Maybe you, like me, have dared to wonder, How can it possibly be any worse than this? So with fear and trembling, we wait for a Savior to save us from it all. Each year, year after year, we wait and we wait. And perhaps sometimes in our own Great Disappointment we wonder if we are waiting in vain for a savior who will never come...

Hope in the Text

² <http://web.archive.org/web/20030201222721/www.markers.com/ink/mlk02c.htm>

But perhaps we have understood this all wrong. When we hear the word “apocalypse,” many of us imagine a cataclysmic end of the world scenario - with fire and brimstone, maybe even zombies. But in actuality, the word apocalypse just means “to unveil or to reveal.” It is quite literally the lifting of a veil, a revelation. This is why the last book in our Bible is given its name - Revelation.

And maybe, just maybe what Jesus is revealing to us here is not just a frightening vision of the future. Maybe Jesus is also actually giving us a vision of hope for this moment - now. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Christ is coming. But at the same time, we also know that God is already with us. This is Christ’s revelation. This is his promise. God is here now!

In this moment, in an unprecedented way, the entire world has all stopped together. There is a saying I heard recently that we should not feel like we are currently “stuck at home” – we are “safe at home.” Stuck versus safe – a very different way to frame and to view this moment. In the same way, we can view this time in a different way. In a sacred way. Right now, we can dare to be still, even if only for a moment, in the presence of God. With the world on pause around us, we too can pause to still our souls and to quiet all of the clamors of that outside world.

During this strange time, I am often reminded of these words from Psalm 46 –

*God is our refuge and our strength...
We will not fear, though the earth give way...
The Lord of hosts is with us...
“Be still and know that I am God.”*

This is God’s promise. Even now. Even when the world seems to be at its bleakest. “Be still”... Be still and know that you are not alone... Be still and remember that God is with us... Sit for a moment, lift the veil, and see there is incredible goodness even in the midst of the brokenness. Take a breath and be filled with the revelation that our Savior saves us even now.

Hope in the World

Fred Rogers - who is perhaps even better known to many as Mr. Rogers, the television host on PBS - was a Presbyterian minister and an inspiration to countless children. When parents asked him how they should explain tragedies on the news to their children, he shared this story:

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."³

Be still, look for the helpers, and be reminded of God's presence with us. Not in some far off future - but now, here, even in this moment.

We see Christ in the first responders, who risk their lives to save ours...

Together we will not fear, though the earth give way...

We see Christ in the work of the scientists, fighting to find vaccines and medicines to help those who are sick and to prevent others from becoming sick...

Even in the midst of terror, God is our refuge and our strength...

We see Christ in the creative ways so many people in our community and other communities have found to stay connected and to spread love, even while staying safe at home...

We shall not fear...

And we see Christ in all the people of the world who have taken such unprecedented steps in a courageous attempt to save the lives of the most vulnerable among us.

God is our refuge...

These are only a few of the helpers among us, bearing witness to God's presence in our world. This is our hope. This is how we know that we can heal the brokenness of this world. For we are all helpers. We are Christ's disciples.

Amen.