

“The End of the World as We Know It”
SERIES: *Where We Belong* – 1 of 6

a sermon based on

Mark 13:24-37

and delivered on

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1st Sunday of Advent (Year B)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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It's that time of year again. Isn't it? Thanksgiving Day was Thursday, which makes this the first Sunday of Advent, except... for those times when Thanksgiving falls on the twenty-second or twenty-third when we have to wait a week for Advent. That throws us off, when that happens. Doesn't it.

Everybody knows that the Christmas season begins the day after Thanksgiving. Right? In the past couple of decades the retail jargon regarding "Black Friday" has become part of our common lexicon. I'm old enough that I don't remember doorbuster sales on the Friday after Thanksgiving; but there was something special about that day.

Growing up in Peoria, Illinois meant attending the longest running Santa Claus parade on that Friday following Thanksgiving. That was my clue that the "Christmas season" had begun. As Susan and I (mostly Susan – I was bored and unimpressed) watched the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade on Thursday – a parade in name only (There were no crowds lining the streets as floats and bands paraded by.) – I had that sense of nostalgia for the Santa Claus parade of my youth – a parade that was turned around this year into a drive-by parade in which the spectators paraded by safely confined within their vehicles.

Then there's this aching fear that the world as we knew it, has ended. Will we ever be able to stand along Main Street in Cherry Valley on the Fourth of July as children scramble into the street to collect candy thrown their way in the midst of that parade? Will we ever be able to sit elbow to elbow in Wrigley Field cheering on the Cubs? Will we ever be able to crowd into this sanctuary on Easter morning, singing the great anthems of the Church? Will we even be able to gather at all on Christmas Eve – if not to sing, then to hear the sacred songs and the word proclaiming that God chose to dwell among us?

Today, we begin a new sermon series: *Where We Belong*, in which during the season of Advent and through Christmas, we explore our place in the kingdom of a God who made his place among us – for us. My message today is *The End of the World as We Know It*. Although we meet this day in the midst of a pandemic, that's not what I mean by the end of the world as we know it. We have hope. It appears that at least two vaccines will be ready for distribution within the next two or three weeks. Others are showing promise. It might be a challenging, but not impossible that with other vaccines and enough of you demonstrating the wisdom to avail yourselves, that maybe by Easter – April 4. Some may say that's not realistic. Maybe it's not. But, how realistic was it for humankind to expect the Supreme Deity to take upon himself our form for the sole purpose of dying so that we might have life?

We've come to expect that in the weeks preceding Christmas to welcome once again – in the words of Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights* – sweet little baby Jesus, just lying there in his manger. I don't think that memory is bad. When my daughter graduated high school – I went back to that hospital waiting room and that moment when the nurse brought her out for me to see. I went back there again when she graduated college, at her wedding, and each time that I found out that she was expecting and when she's given birth. It's okay to go back to the manger, to remember where the story began. What's not okay is to get stuck there. When we do, we forget the promise of that moment – the possibilities yet to come.

Our lives are filled with endings and beginnings – some subtle like when that sweet child trusts everything you say but in her teen years knows that you are a complete imbecile. Then we remember the horror when you first heard your own parents' "idiotic" words coming from your own mouth. And then there's hope. Right?

The eighth grade student graduating from middle school or junior high does so anticipating the wonders of being a high schooler, only to discover that rather than being a bigshot eighth grader, he is but a freshman. For those who go on to college at least there's the opportunity to reinvent yourself around those who didn't know you when. For those who didn't go on to college or who won't, the end of a world in which maybe you were a star on the playing field and now entering the workforce in an entry level position: maybe a grunt or a gofer, or maybe it's off to the glamor of basic training. Right?

These are the transitions that we expect in life. Each one changes everything about the world that we once knew. Sometimes – often? – those transitions come with a certain amount of trepidation, because for all our hopes, we just don't know.

Advent is like that. When we take it for what it is – the expectation of Christ's return, we're tempted to revert to merely look back at the Nativity story that we know, rather than the promise that lies ahead.

At first blush it doesn't seem that Jesus is much help, here. In the Gospel we hear today, he speaks about suffering and darkness – this deep sense of foreboding. But then he says, "Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great glory and power..." (Mk 13:26) That's the hope. It's a hope that calls us to strive for the promise rather than getting caught up in trepidation and fear. It's a hope that calls us to keep vigilant.

We don't know the hour or day when he will return. What we do know is that he will. Why? Because he said so, and he did everything else that he promised. Not knowing when – especially when it seems delayed – can be a challenge. We may be tempted to slack off in claiming the kingdom of God in our midst or even to fall victim to the heretical teaching that it's okay if the world goes to Hell in a handbasket, because Jesus will come to fix everything. If you knew that Jesus could show up at your home any moment would you leave a mess for him to clean when he comes knocking? Really? That doesn't make sense, does it?

Then again, there's our tendency in not knowing to lose that sense of urgency. During the NCAA Regional Finals in 1987, Louisiana State University was leading Indiana University by eight points with only a couple of minutes left to go in the game. They had the game in the bag. But then it happened, even the announcers commented on it, rather than playing as they'd done to get the lead, the LSU players seemed to be watching the clock. As they did so, Indiana kept playing and ended up not only winning that game by one point but going on to win the national championship.¹

None of us knows that hour when Christ will appear. We do know that he will. He won't just wait until that day of judgement. He comes to each of us at different points in our lives. Scripture testifies to this: When Christ came to Saul on that road to Damascus, he'd already ascended into heaven. Maybe Saul wasn't ready for it, but when his eyes were finally opened the world as he knew it had ended, but the new world he encountered would lead him to be an apostle.

Jesus has made a place for you in his kingdom. It's not a place to rest and relax on the memories of the past, but a purpose assured by the faithfulness we remember that lead us not

¹ Craig Brian Larson, *Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Baker Books, 1993) 209.

only to hope but claiming the promise and claiming our place – our purpose – our role – in the new heaven and earth that he came to bring forth. AMEN.