

“PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD”  
Isaiah 64:1-9, I Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37  
December 2-3, 2017

In his book, *Character Forged from Conflict*, Gary Preston writes this story:

Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, there was a story, perhaps apocryphal, about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background a telegraph clacked away. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other waiting applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. Why had this man been so bold? They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They took more than a little satisfaction in assuming the young man who went into the office would be reprimanded for his presumption and summarily disqualified for the job.

Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the inner office escorted by the interviewer, who announced to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man."

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and then one spoke up saying, "Wait a minute—I don't understand something. He was the last one to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair."

The employer responded, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. So the job is his."

God uses many means to demonstrate His care—not only through His Word, but in His

Spirit and the midnight sky. We need only to be alert to these signs.<sup>1</sup> And we see that in our Scripture lessons today.

The lesson of Isaiah 64 invites God to come again to the earth with a powerful display, getting the attention of all the people of the world so that they might know that He is God of All. The prophet recalls how those who are open to seeing God rejoice in His presence with them each and every day, looking around them to see the beauty of all that God had made and all that God is doing. But because of our own preoccupation with ourselves and the things of this world, we are too often blinded to what is really going on around us and we miss God's presence – just like the 7 waiting to be interviewed for a Morse code operator position. And even when we try to become aware of God's presence, often we find ourselves going against His will and His way so that we make ourselves His enemies. Yet because we are His, created in His delight for His pleasure, as we call out to God for the newness of life only He can give through His promised Messiah, Jesus, we find His mercy and grace through His great love for us. It takes being aware of the presence of God to enjoy His blessings.

And it was the Apostle Paul who encouraged the people in Corinth to continue to walk with Jesus Christ and grow deeper in their knowledge and understanding of how He wants us to live for Him. For as we let “the message of Christ...become so firmly established in [us]...” we receive abundant blessings in our waiting for His return to us. As we live our lives in waiting for Him to come back to us, we receive the strength, power and courage to live for Him through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Yet, it is for us to stay ready for the Day of His Return so that we do not lose our way or become distracted with the stuff of the world and thereby lose our faith in Jesus.

And that is the intention of Jesus' words to His disciples in Mark 13. Jesus tells them what will happen before His return in order that the followers of Jesus not get disheartened or lose interest or grow weary of His return. In the first portion of the chapter we have Peter,

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<sup>1</sup> (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg. 128-129)

James, John and Andrew coming to Him privately asking Jesus to tell them when the Temple would be destroyed and what signs would be present to know that it is about to happen. So Jesus gives them several signs of what will happen: *“Many...will come and say, ‘I am he!’ and will fool many...Countries will fight each other...there will be earthquakes...and famines...”* (5-8).

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to say that His followers *“will be arrested, taken to court...beaten...stand before rulers and kings for my sake to tell them the Good News. But before the end comes, the gospel must be preached to all peoples...”* (9-11), and even families will turn on each other, persecuting those who follow Jesus. Jesus tells them, *“Everyone will hate you because of me. But whoever holds out to the end will be saved”* (13).

Sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it? Each of those things are very present in our world today, even families turning on each other for the sake of Jesus Christ. Though other ages may have had some of these things happening, today everything on the list is taking place. As yet there are still some language and people groups that have not yet received the Gospel in their heart language to fully understand the Good News of Jesus, those language and people groups are growing smaller every day. Bible translation is happening at a very high rate of speed so that everyone on the earth is getting a chance to hear about Jesus and make a choice about Him.

But then Jesus gives us strange signs to watch out for – things that will happen for all to see, but unless we're in tune with the signs of the Lord's coming, we will miss. Listen to the rest of the chapter of Mark 13. (READ Mark 13:24-37)

Great celestial events will take place for everyone to see and be amazed by. But this does not mean the destruction of the universe, but rather the judgement of a fallen world by God because of the shared responsibility of our sin. In the midst of this judgement and devastation will come the promised new world listed throughout the Old Testament Scriptures.

“The great emphasis of these verses is on disclosure and triumph. Whereas the Son of Man has been hidden or at least veiled in His first coming, now He will be revealed. Men ‘will see’ Him and see Him for who He really is. Whereas He has been the lowly Suffering Servant,

despised and rejected by men, the Son of Man at His Second Coming will come in triumph – ‘with great power and glory.’ And His chief concern at His coming will be to bring together His people so that they may be with Him.”<sup>2</sup>

You see, God wants everyone to come to Him, and greatly desires that none should perish, but that all would come to repentance through Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:9). God wants us to give our hearts to Jesus, become reconciled to Him through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that took away the sins of the world for everyone who believes in Him as the Savior. But how could God judge those who have never heard of Jesus? Therefore God is allowing the time for all people to come to know Jesus before the judgement takes place.

Jesus goes on with the live example of the fig tree putting out buds and leaf. In Israel, most of the trees are evergreens, but the fig tree is the exception. Just like other deciduous trees, the development of buds in the spring and the leaves becoming present on the trees demonstrates that the winter is gone and that summer is right around the corner. Jesus uses this natural event to tell of His return, noting that there will be signs to understand the season for those who are a tuned to them. But His assurance to us is a little confusing.

Jesus makes the statement, “*I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened*” (30). Does this mean those people living at the time of Jesus? Or does it mean the whole human race under sins sway? The definition of “generation” gives us several different understandings, each that could be used. The definition goes “*the act of generating; single succession in natural descent; people living at the same time; race.*” While most understand generation to mean those living at the same time, in this situation I prefer the other definition, that of a single succession in natural descent.

We have all come into the need of God’s work of Salvation found in Jesus. Everyone on earth is guilty of sin and estranged from God because of it. Since God’s desire is that we become reconciled to Him again, I believe that He is waiting for the whole world to hear about Jesus so

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<sup>2</sup> (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, editor, [Regency Reference Library, 1984] Vol. 8, pg. 750)

that only those who purposely turn away from Him are rejected by God at the judgement. So since the Jews initially rejected Jesus as the Messiah and failed to be the ones who proclaimed Him to the rest of the world, God has allowed a grace period to come into play that still gives the rest of the people who are counted as Gentiles the chance to come to know Him, too. While it is true that many of these signs happened shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the judgement has not yet come for the whole world by God with regard to the punishment of sin.

But because we are this far away from the time of Jesus' presence here on the earth, there is that tendency to say, "Well, it hasn't happened yet in all of these years, so I don't have to do anything about it now. We've got plenty of time. No worries!"

And that is the focus of Jesus' last words of this chapter. He says that even though these things have not yet happened all this time, that does not give us permission to take life easy and relax in our duties of taking the Good News for the Salvation of the World to each and every person in the world. We must remember that it is by God's timeline that the judgement will take place. We don't know when it will happen. Even our best guesses come and go and we are found to be silly in even attempting to put a time line upon when Jesus' return will happen. But even though we don't know the day or the hour of His return, that doesn't mean that we get lazy and stop doing the work that God has given to us to do as we wait. It is imperative that we not lose heart at doing good (Galatians 6:9), but that we continue to live our best as living witnesses of the love of the Lord our God. We must keep working for the transformation of the world for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not to make them United Methodist, but to bring them to Christ Jesus.

So what does this mean for us here today? It can become so easy for us to gather each week, sitting in the same pews, seeing the same people, becoming comfortable with our place here in this church, but are we really sleeping, and shirking our duties before God? I look out around us at the numbers of people who do not participate in any way in church, much less know who Jesus is. How will those people know about Jesus? Will the Travel Channel or the History

Channel on TV let them know who Jesus is? Will the department stores all around us tell of what Christmas really means so that the people might rejoice in what God has done? Will our liberal media take the time to give us the chance to fully explain who Jesus is and invite all the views to come to know Him? Will our local governments stand up for the Christian faith and openly tell of the wonderful work of Salvation that God has provided for All the people of the world? NO!!! It's up to each of us to take that great Good News of Jesus from here out to the world wherever we go to help them prepare for the coming of the Lord. IT STARTS HERE WITH US, CLAIMING JESUS FOR OUR VERY OWN, AND THEN SEEING THE NEED FOR THOSE AROUND US TO HEAR ABOUT HIM, TOO! WE ARE THE AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST! WE ARE THE ONES TO TAKE THE GOOD NEWS OUT TO THEM! IT'S UP TO US TO FULFILL THE WORK OF GOD IN OUR WORLD TODAY!

So don't wait for the person next door to tell that neighbor about the love of Jesus. Don't wait for that person NEXT TO YOU to do the work of God in the lives of your family. YOU DO IT! You be prepared for the coming of the Lord Jesus, and they YOU get to work in taking that good news of Jesus to all those around you so that they, too, might be prepared for the coming of the Lord. It's OUR job to be the messengers of God's love through Jesus Christ.

Be alert! Watch! Stay ready to tell of the wonderful things that God has done to bring eternal life to all the people of the world, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.