

WHAT TO DO UNTIL THE MESSIAH COMES!

MARK 13:1-13

The film 2012 opened this week. It's a story that maintains that the end of life as we know it will take place on the 21st of December of 2012, because you see that's the end of the Mayan calendar, the end of history. Then in a film to be released at the end of the year called the "the Road" a film about A father and son bonding trip across a post apocalyptic America and because it's such good writing I suppose much will be made of that. And if you're aware of anything around you, you see that we are going through a period of great political and social upheaval. And if we focus on that, it is a time of great fear and insecurity, which is always tempting to allow yourself to get swept away and caught up in the spirit of the age.

There has never been a time in history in which all was secure.

In fact Jesus, describes them as birth pangs, an awareness, a reminder, if you will, that something new is coming, a new world,

A new creation, a new life; its something he has promised.

And that is what Christ's disciples point to, not the speculations of the end of the age. For as Jesus says later in the chapter, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." If Jesus didn't know it, why would the Mayans; nor anybody in the church for that matter. For that is not the focus of God's people.

Our focus according to Jesus is concerning the Gospel. "On account of me you will stand as witnesses before different kinds of people in different situations. And the Gospel must first of all be preached to all nations. Don't be worried about what you are going to say, just whatever is given to you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit." For we can focus on the fear, or we can be witnesses to the Gospel. How does that Gospel read?

All people are sinners and are justified, redeemed, saved only by faith in the merits of Jesus Christ who suffered and died for you. Basically there are only two religions in this world. The one religion is a religion of 2 letters: DO. The other is a religion of 4 letters: DONE. Jesus Christ has done it all for you, our salvation is done. Jesus said, "IT IS FINISHED." On the cross, everything he came to do for you and all people is now finished. You have nothing to do to get to heaven.

What is to be said now? But there perhaps is one more thing and that's to hand over the saying of it to you. And that is done each week. Say it! For God's sake, say it!

For God's sake, say it! Say what? Say the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's son, crucified and risen for you. Yes, say the Gospel that God justifies the godless by faith alone. Say the Gospel of unconditional forgiveness of sins for Jesus sake, the Gospel of absolutely free grace. The Gospel moves you to take up the challenge, to be an absolver. For God's sake, for the sake of him who gave up his life to loosen your lips, say it! In the power of the Spirit who on this day so long ago loosed our tongues, say it!

Why this charge? This perhaps impetuous plea to say it? A funny thing happened to the church on its way to the public forum. It seems to have forgotten what it was going to say! There is something of a conspiracy of silence abroad among us that seduces and entices us not to say it, at least too confidently. It is not an overt or self-conscious conspiracy, or something plotted in the back room to silence the saying of it. It comes more from within than without, being made up of mostly good intentions, bits of advice, observations on this or that, which taken by themselves may even be quite justified, but which taken together lead willy-nilly in one direction, you best not say the Gospel, you had best better find something else to do, something else to justify your discipleship.

You have, I expect, in the course of your life, heard it all. The litany of complaints that seem innocent enough, the bits and pieces of counsel, the good advice, the proper observations, the wise commentary on the times. It goes something like this:

Is it not presumptuous or even preposterous to think that much can be accomplished just by saying it? Do words count for much after all? Is thinking all that important? You can't just say it, you have to do it? Deeds speak louder than words. Besides you have to earn the right to be heard, don't you? It's not what you say but what you do that really matters. Just "being there" is probably more important. The ministry of presence is more important than the ministry of witnessing.

The relevance of a gospel of free grace is questionable in an age concerned about finding a gracious neighbor rather than a gracious God. Salvation by works is wrong of course, but after all, who is trying these days? Isn't the promise just pie in the sky by and by? Isn't free grace dangerous? Or too cheap? Who will tend to the pressings problems of these times, like hunger, justice, and peace etc. if they hear of such grace? Is it not too individualistic, too Pauline, too Lutheran, too unecumenical, and so on? Put the pieces of the litany together and they seem to add up to a litany of silence. Don't say it; find something more comfortable to do.

.What shall we say to all this? "O lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall speak thy praise." Whatever you do, do not let it reduce you to silence.

We are witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we come together for worship we determine again who we are and why we do the things we do. Essentially we are witness. That's the bottom line. We are of course a lot of things just like everybody else: mother, father, child, worker, but essentially we are witnesses. We are witnesses not to ourselves but to another.

One could, I expect, go through a whole catalogue of things we could be tempted to become. But these things get broken on the hard rock: you are witnesses, just witnesses. That is the bottom line. Whatever else we might aspire to be.

Why just witnesses? Scripture tells us that it was our sins that put Christ on the cross. Seeing the crime and sensing our implications in it, we cannot pretend anymore. We cannot aspire to be religious holy people or gurus or paragons of virtue. We can only bear witness, shocked and stunned witness to the fact that the Christ, God's Messiah, was killed and cast out of our world, wasted!

But that of course is not the end, to our continued amazement. Had it ended with that we could not, we would not, want to be witnesses. We would rather try to cover it up,

forget it, hide it, bury it under the earth, put the body in a deep, deep tomb and roll a great stone over it, hoping that in time the world would forget about it like all its other crimes. But God raised him up. When we had done our worst, God did his best. God turned the tables on us. He vindicated the one whom everyone rejected by raising him from the dead. Now the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone of something new. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations. God began his church, gathering a repentant and forgiven people to himself.

Jesus in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus brought them to see that his forgiveness is what God wants in the world. Everything written in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms is fulfilled in the crucified and risen One. God has reached his goal. He wants a world, a people that lives on and acts on his forgiveness. He doesn't want or need self styled holiness, or religious gurus, or self appointed prophets. He wants a world that will repent and act on the word of forgiveness.

We are witnesses to these things. We have seen and heard it. And having seen and heard, we cannot be silent. We cannot be the same anymore. We must break the conspiracy of silence and tell the world of the good news of forgiveness from God. But it is not only the telling. Witnessing means a certain kind of life as well, but not that we are witnesses. We are witnesses to Another. That is the bottom line. That is what we are about here today when we come together to reaffirm who we are. We bear witness to the conviction that the word must be preached, that we cannot be silent.

But why so? You might ask. "Doesn't everybody know it already?" Doesn't everybody know that God is love, that God is a forgiving God?" Yes, perhaps they do to some degree or another. Everybody knows that God is loving and forgiving in general. That's his business. But you see that is not good enough. The question is, how do you know he forgives you?

How do you know what God thinks of you unless someone with the authority and right to do so actually tells you, actually delivers the message?

That ultimately is what the death and resurrection of Jesus is about, giving us the right and the authority to speak those precious words for God himself: I forgive you your sins for Jesus sake. Not just to speak in generalities and platitudes about God, but to say, "I forgive you."

Before Jesus, in the OT especially, everyone knew that God was loving and forgiving in general, but Jesus came to say that word in particular. He had the nerve to say it: "I forgive you your sins."

The result was that he got killed for it because everyone thought it was presumptuous and blasphemous. "No one," they said, "can forgive sins but God alone." So he was killed. But God raised him up. God put his stamp of approval on Jesus' preaching of forgiveness in particular. And it is he, our risen Lord, who speaks the words to us, telling us to go and say the same thing for God. You are witnesses to these things. That is why he gives the promise of the Holy Spirit being with us. This is what God wants done. And while we can focus on the fears and try to figure out something that we have no way of

knowing, is that our Father wants us to share the Gospel. Not just that God is loving and forgiving in general, but that he forgives you for Jesus sake.

As Christians you have that authority. That is the bottom line. That is the witness. We send you out with our prayers, and blessing and hopes. Remember through all the various things you will be asked to do, that you are witnesses to another. So witness to these things of his. Remember that above all, that the promise of the Father, the power from on high is, above all, the power of forgiveness. Don't forget to claim that for yourself. You are not called to carry the burdens of the world on your back. You are not called to be religious megalomaniacs, gurus or whatever. You are witnesses to these things. You see, there is real good news for you too. You aren't called to do it all, just to bear witness. God will take it from there. You will be clothed with power from on high. Speak that word of forgiveness. Break the conspiracy of silence, and God be with you. The one sure thing in the world of shaking foundations will be the fact that the Gospel will be preached to the end of the age; the birth pangs of which you will always be able to see, until the Messiah comes again.

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