

“Days and Hours”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 29, 2020

5th Sunday of Lent

Psalm 102:12-17, 25-28

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 13:1-8, 32-37

In these particular days and hours, more of them spent at home than many of us are used to, in the midst of more uncertainty than we sometimes believe that we can handle, looking into the face of the kinds of tragedy and destruction beyond what any of us can imagine, we might easily be overcome with a wide range of conflicting emotions. There is fear and grief, there is anger about what could have been known or done sooner or more effectively, there are both specific and more nebulous things that we miss: routines and patterns, physical gatherings with family and friends such as we have come to expect on Sunday mornings. These days and hours feel unprecedented and out-of-the-ordinary.

And yet, there are other things that once felt so essential and urgent that don't anymore. Many of us have not had to rush out the door to get to work or to class, or we are re-discovering simpler pleasures like taking walks or doing jigsaw puzzles or cooking new recipes. Sheltering in place might mean that we have had the chance to have longer conversations that didn't before fit into our schedules, or to re-assess what things we have as compared to what we need. Dave Hollis has written, “in the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to.”¹

There is some comfort to be found in the reminder that we are not the first people, or the first generation, to live through challenging times. Whether it was relatives who lived through the Depression, or ancestors who lived through the epidemics of the Middle Ages, or even the disciples who worried about Rome destroying their Temple, religion and society, we are connected in ways that we have either overlooked or chosen to forget.

The 13th chapter of Mark's gospel – from which we read the opening and closing verses this morning – comes immediately before the passion narrative. It is called the little apocalypse, meaning unveiling, revelation; so named not because it is of little significance, but relative to the Apocalypse of John, the final book of the New Testament – what we call Revelation – this one is shorter and less fantastical.

¹ As quote by John Erik Pattison

Both describe the end of the world as we know it – also the title of a song that these days has returned to prominence; a foretelling of global destruction that precedes the redemption, or rebirth, of the world in God’s image.

This is an interesting time to be reading Mark’s telling of the apocalypse; the first time that any of us have done so in the midst of an actual apocalypse. For, right now, the world as we know it is – in some powerful ways and a scope that we can only now begin to imagine – coming to an end. I say this not to be dramatic or to scare you into any action or belief beyond what are already experiencing; I am not trying to mimic a street preacher standing, shouting on a street corner with a sandwich board. And yet, it is certainly true that previously hidden things are now being unveiled and revealed; that the world as we knew it has come to its end.

The question the disciples ask Jesus in the midst of this apocalyptic warning is: when will these things come to pass? Instead of answering them right away, Jesus first instructs them to be on guard because, in situations like these, there will always be people trying to take advantage of the crisis by trying to exploit and deceive; that false information will be flying around. Not only will there be wars, but also rumors of wars; in our day, illness and rumors of false cures. “Many will come in my name,” Jesus warns, “and they will lead many astray.”

The image of birth pangs is common in apocalyptic writings as a metaphor for speaking of the suffering that will be experienced before the end. It is ultimately a hopeful image, as it expresses a purpose and finality to the pain. The anguish will ultimately give way to new life, to a new creation. In the midst of chaos and destruction, Jesus brings words of hope. The story will not end in gloom and doom, but a future of salvation.²

But this does not answer the question of when. Finally, at the end of the chapter, Jesus comes back to the topic and confesses that no-one, not the angels, not even he himself, knows the day or the hour when this will come to pass; only the Father knows. Therefore, we are to stay alert, to not let ourselves fall asleep, when there is work still to be done.

We all know people who have reacted to these days and hours differently than have we. Some of them might appear frantic: stockpiling goods at home or glued to the TV for every press conference. Others seem unnervingly lax: downplaying the significance of the threat, to the point of even mocking those who are trying to be prepared. We hear some voices saying that this will all be over in a couple of weeks, while others predict many months of a spiraling crisis. It’s difficult for us to refrain feeling anger or disbelief at those responding in different

² Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

ways than we; to believe that we might be the ones subject to rumors or disinformation.

There are and always will be two opposite and equally problematic extremes regarding preparation for apocalyptic times. One is being overly eager to interpret contemporary events as signs of the end times. The other is a complete lack of preparation, giving very little thought to the reality of the coming change. It is unhelpful during times like these either to shake our fists at the sky or put our heads in the sand.

Still, there are some helpful practices that, as Christians, we can participate in during these hours and days. One is to acknowledge that we are all going to experience a wide range of emotions. It is not uncommon in the midst of crisis to feel alternately manic and exhausted. We may feel urges to either reach out to others or withdraw into ourselves. We might easily be overcome by acts of courage and compassion or angry when we witness acts of selfishness and recklessness. It is important to acknowledge these complicated reactions in ourselves and those around us and to show the marks of understanding, endurance and love.

Even in the midst of loss, it is important to ground our lives in gratitude. For you, this might mean you need to keep a daily list of what there is to be thankful for; or to look out the window or step outside to appreciate nature. As spring nears, our world is beginning to come to bud and bloom. Our appreciation for God's blessings include the seasons of the year as well as the seasons of life, which are always turning.

It is also important for us to realize the importance of spiritual practices, even if they may not or cannot be the same as in more normal times. Many of us are missing the familiarity of our corporate worship and traditions during these uncommon days and hours. While there are ways to attend virtually, prayer and worship will need to adapt for this unknown period of time of being at home and alone. As much as we might lament that congregations will not be gathering for the quickly coming celebrations of Holy Week and Easter, we take refuge in the truth that God is always present with us, maybe most especially when it seems that the stone has been rolled in front of the tomb and darkness has fallen.

For it is in a risen and living Christ that we place our hope. The present circumstances, no matter how dark and uncertain they might seem, do not define the good news for us. Even if our celebration of the resurrection looks different this year, we remain Easter people, living our lives on this side of the cross, where the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. We want to know when:

when will this time we are living through pass; we want to know that our loved ones, and our first responders and medical workers, will be okay; we want to know if we can make plans for summer travel or attend weddings or how graduations that have been canceled will be celebrated.

In response to their question of when, Jesus responds to his disciples saying 1) don't be deceived, and 2) stay alert. Don't think, in these days and hours that are in so many ways unprecedented, that people in times past haven't lived through and past similar crises. Don't believe that God is calling you to be complacent and reckless; and don't think that there is only one proper or best response. For many of us, this time has meant slowing down and staying at home; for others, it means working harder or worrying more. Either way, there is work to be done: as Christians we are called to help keep ourselves and each other safe, to pray with and for one another, and to give generously if and when we are able.

This may be the normal that we will one day get back to, or it may be – for some of us – a new normal for a world that will be fundamentally changed. Jesus told his disciples that what they would experience were but the birth pangs, that more important than *when* was *what*: what would be unveiled that they would see; that what they did would make a difference; that what they practiced and believed would sustain them with hope: hope even in the face of tremendous uncertainty, grief and loss. Let us therefore pray that we might maintain a hope that will become a shining light for the world as we will come to know it. AMEN.