**November 30th, 2023- Bible Study**

**Scripture: Mark 13:24-37**

In the scriptures, prophesy often has a twofold reality. When one of the prophets speak the words that God has revealed to them, often there is a present (or nearly present) reality that they address, but also a more distant and broad reality that they point us to. In Isaiah 7, which says, “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” the scriptures say that is about Jesus. But it is also a sign for kings who were fighting seven hundred years earlier.

In the created world, and in the scriptures, there are layers of meaning. We don’t need to understand the elemental make-up of the sun to experience its life-giving effects, but it is a great joy to those who dedicate their life to understanding more about it. The scriptures are similar. God has given his word for all people, and there is joy and life for everyone within the scriptures. The smallest baby who does not yet even understand language is blessed by the scripture, yet there is also a rich joy from delving into the layers and context of the scriptures to understand even further.

Jesus has been asked when the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed, and he responds that there will be some confusion and deception about when. When Jesus speaks to his disciples in the following verses, he is speaking about things that will happen within their lifetime, but also things that will come more fully true later in time. Because of this mixture of near and far prophesy, confusion can arise, but what is most important is to keep Jesus’ promises at the center.

**24“But in those days, after that tribulation: The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not shed its light; 25the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26Then they will see** **the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27He will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.**

As we read these verses from Mark, we must remember that Jesus is speaking to disciples that still do not understand that he will be killed and then rise from the dead. They are asking about the destruction of the temple, and he will give them the answer, but it is about far more than just the temple.

Often, these verses are read as being about the end times, and while they may also share that meaning, they speak more closely to address the disciples’ questions. If we follow the gospel accounts of when Jesus dies, we read about the sky going dark. In Jesus’ day, and for many years before, it was common for the stars to be viewed by many people as “powers in the heavens” and even as gods. In Genesis and all throughout the gospels, we see dark spiritual forces that God is reigning in and casting out. We know that through Jesus’ death, the powers of sin and death are defeated. Jesus shakes the foundations of all these other powers of evil that held sway over the world since the fall of Adam and Eve, and brings us freedom.

The verse about “the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory” is a reference to Daniel 7. There, “one like a son of man” kills the evil beasts that have had dominion over the earth, although some continue to be granted continued life for a time. This “son of man” then comes “with the clouds of heaven” and “approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him.”

When we read this context, it sounds a lot like Jesus’ death, where sin is defeated, but still continues for a time, and Jesus ascension to his father in heaven. So, instead of being a text about Jesus’ *second* coming, it can be read as describing Jesus’ *first* coming and ascension to his Father in heaven.

Jesus then sends out his heavenly messengers, and all his chosen people, and yet he gathers them as one body: his body. They are gathered and sent out and to continue the work that has begun, and will continue through Jesus. When the disciples see Jesus going to his father, they see him as he truly is, and begin to understand what he has done. When Jesus is speaking here, the disciples don’t yet understand all of that yet, so he prepares them.

**28“Learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. 29In the same way, when you see these things happening, recognize that he is near—at the door.**

**30“Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things take place. 31Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.**

Jesus knows that when he is killed, they will not understand. It will seem like all hope has been lost. But just as through the winter everything dies, when the spring comes, we begin to see the signs of new life. This is also true in our own context, as we wait for Jesus’ return, and although we are often tempted to despair, or wonder where God is, we are reminded to be vigilant.

The clearest indication that Jesus is not just talking about a day that is in our future, is that he tells his own disciples that “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” If Jesus was talking only about his second coming, then these words would not have been true. But in 70 A.D. (roughly 37-40 years after Jesus speaks these words), the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed completely by the Romans. What Jesus began by tearing the curtain, was completed when the stones of the temple were destroyed, but God’s temple was transferred to our hearts. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, but God’s temple was not.

**32“Now concerning that day or hour no one knows—neither the angels in heaven nor the Son —but only the Father.**

**33“Watch! Be alert! For you don’t know when the time is coming.**

Jesus gives many parables that are concerned with living faithful lives. We are called to be people who live out God’s good plans for us each and every day, not as a last-minute insurance policy. God’s timing is a mystery to us, Jesus even indicates that it is a mystery to him!

This is a wonderful reminder of just how much Jesus gave up to become like us. Jesus is fully God, so he could have chosen to know everything, but he humbles himself and becomes fully human, limiting his knowledge to become more like us. Jesus gives us the perfect example of obedient love for God, by living a life that won’t be ashamed when God reveals himself to us.

**34“It is like a man on a journey, who left his house, gave authority to his servants, gave each one his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to be alert. 35Therefore be alert, since you don’t know when the master of the house is coming—whether in the evening or at midnight or at the crowing of the rooster or early in the morning. 36Otherwise, when he comes suddenly he might find you sleeping. 37And what I say to you, I say to everyone: Be alert!**

Jesus knows that when he is killed, his disciples will be confused and discouraged. Despite having told them repeatedly what was going to happen, they could not imagine it. Here is another example of how prophesy can be difficult: everything that Jesus did was foretold by the scriptures, and yet no one expected it to happen as it did. No one expected God to become human, and to die on our behalf: but he did.

There are hints here which also suggest that Jesus is speaking here about his own “journey” through death and resurrected life. The rooster that crows (which no doubt Peter would later remember) and falling asleep (which his disciples did in the garden of Gethsemane) were true of Jesus’ disciples, and they can be true of us as well.

In Advent, we are reminded of when Jesus first came to earth. Humble and poor; for our sake. We are also reminded that Jesus is coming again to turn tribulation into new life, and to set everything right. Although they may seem like a strange choice for Advent, they actually give us great hope for the future.

When Jesus returns, we do not need to be filled with fear. For those who love and follow him, it is a joyful day. Like the return of a beloved family member who has been away for a long time, and the only communication has been letters or phone calls. When Jesus returns, heaven will come fully to earth. We want to be people who are found joining with him in that work: people whose lives have been shaped and changed to be filled with love of God, and those he has put in our lives.

What Jesus gives us is not meant as a threat, it is a loving invitation and solemn admonition to not lose sight of the goal, and to finish well, not becoming distracted by the powers in this world that will try to drag us down.

The good news that Jesus has shared with us, is that he is coming back. The way that our world is right now is not the end. Jesus will do all that he has promised, and in the meantime, as we wait, he calls us to live like we are expecting him.