

SERMON 1: On the Road to Readiness.

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19;
1 Corinthians 1:3-9; **Mark 13:24-37**

Please use your imaginations with me. What will the news media headlines be saying near the end of the world?

Global News:
TSX and Dow Jones Plummet as World Ends.

Inc. Magazine:
10 Ways You Can Profit From the Apocalypse.

Saskatoon Star Phoenix:
The current pandemic finally got us.

National Inquirer: Lose 10 Pounds by Judgment Day with Our New "Armageddon" Diet!

Reader's Digest Canada: Successful plans people in the past have made to survive catastrophes.

Western Producer: The pollution realities we we should have warned you about.

Today's Parent: How to assure your children during these frightening days.

Sports Illustrated: Game Over.

Microsoft's Web Site: If you don't experience the rapture, DOWNLOAD Software patch RAPT777.EXE.

The Vancouver Sun: Police and military join in with the riots and hoarding.

Maclean's Magazine: Sorry, we should have stressed climate change and the dangers of the world's military industrial complex more.

Discover Magazine: How will the extinction of all life as we know it affect the way we view the cosmos?

Toronto Globe and Mail: Hell has frozen over. The Maple Leafs won the Stanley Cup.

This is a grim opening for advent, but every year, the lectionary texts open with scriptures of warning. Advent is the beginning of another church calendar year as we seek Jesus, to strengthen us along the road of faith.

Our overall advent theme is, On the Road. Our focus today is, On the road to readiness, staying alert for Jesus' second coming. What does readiness look like? How can we prepare ourselves to receive the One sent to us? May our heart's desire be to make space to receive the gift Creator Almighty God has sent.

As much as most people try to deny it, the end is coming. Whether it's our individual deaths, natural disaster, a climate tragedy, a pandemic, war, or a combination of these. Science tells us this, experience, history and scripture tells us this. It will not be some temporary system failure. Rather it will be a complete crash - that will bring in its wake a new heaven and new earth. There will not be a patch, some fix it quick simple remedy, or a vaccine, that allows us to go on as if nothing had happened.

This ought to catch our attention. It ought to make us think. The end is coming. That is the plain truth of the Bible. And the people who put the lectionary together – point it out to us, on a regular basis, so we don't miss it

Readiness looks like a prayer - as in the reading from Isaiah for you to do at home. He requests God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." Readiness is a desire for our Savior, a heart cry for God at our level and in our circumstances – now! Isaiah projects the miracle of the incarnation "God present with us," meeting the longing of human hearts.

Our psalm reading says, "Awaken your might and come save us! Restore us!"

And readiness is a promise as our message from Mark says: "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the

heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory." The Holy Bible asks us - Are we ready for that moment, when life ends?

I imagine that each of us can remember what happened when we were students back in school and the teacher announced that she was just going to step out of the class for a minute.

I am sure you can remember words like: "Now class, I'm going down the hall to the office to make a call. While I am gone I am going to trust each one of you to act like ladies and gentlemen. Each of you have your work to do. I am going now and I'll be right back."

And I am sure you can remember what happened after she walked out the door.

When the teacher is away, there is a test, a test that many people flunk.

In my school days I remember vividly there were a variety of reactions. Some kids worked, or tried to, while other kids shot spit-balls, paper air-planes, and other missiles. Many others wandered around between the desks - talking to one another, poking each other with pencils, and so forth. I still have pencil led in my right forearm. Whatever occurred, you could be guaranteed that the noise level rose.

Sometimes the whole affair got organized. One or two kids would stand near the door, listening and looking for the teachers return. Some of their buddies ransacked the room, wrote notes on the board, or did something to the teacher's desk and chair.

Right now, teacher Jesus is away. We are living between times, in the times between Christ's first coming as a babe in the manger and his second coming - as Lord and Judge. We live between beginnings. And the question that the gospel poses for us is simply: Are we going to pass the test set for us by our teacher's physical absence? Or are we going to flunk that test - just as so many of us did back during school?

The end, it is coming for this world and to each one of us individually. It might be sooner - or it might be later. But it is coming. We are warned to prepare ourselves. We have the technology to darken the skies, to make the heavens shake and to cause stars to fall. We now have the means to bring about what is described in the Book of Revelation: the means to cause 1/3 of all the birds of the air to perish and 1/3 of the fish of the sea to die. (Rev. 8) By some accounts this is slowly occurring now.

We can now assemble an army of two hundred million soldiers on the fields of Armageddon - which is not far away from the nation of Iraq. A general in England recently said that fighting robots will soon make up 1/4 of the military personal in the field of battle. Revelations 9 envisions a third of humankind being killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur. We have the scorpions today that have fire in their tails and the machinery by which the whole world might see the death of the two men, two witnesses to God's love, in the city of Jerusalem. (Revelation 11)

And if we have the means to make it happen - perish the thought we should actually do so, then how much more so - the Almighty? The Creator who through the prophets spoke of it thousands of years ago. The God who through his Son - promised it - years ago.

From the fig tree lesson we have this illustration. As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, we know that summer is near. So also, when we see these things taking place, we know that Jesus is near.

This triumph of hope, will be truly cataclysmic: the world as we know it projects pessimistic outcomes. But this world belongs to a Creator and it can be changed. It will be changed, and changed so radically that people will someday speak of a time when heaven and earth passed away. Mark clearly wants this to be part of the faith that informs our daily lives.

Some may think, "Since the time of Jesus' coming cannot be known, we need not think

much about it." Mark draws the opposite conclusion: since the timing is unknown, we should think about it all the time, and prepare for it regularly!

Some often think, "Since the time is unknown, it could be hundred, or thousands, or millions of years from now." Mark draws a very different conclusion: since the timing is unknown, it could be today! Maybe this evening, or at midnight, or when dawn breaks.

The season of Advent is about the coming of Jesus. The coming of the Lord as a babe in a manger in Bethlehem. And the coming of the Lord as a judge in power and might. We know the first coming of Jesus shows us the way of salvation. And we are told, Lord Jesus' second coming will signify huge changes and the end. No reboot. To our knowledge, no restart, no going back to what we consider normal.

So the question of the season, the challenge of the weeks that lie ahead of us is this - are we ready? Are we prepared for this trip? Are we ready to meet God? Are we ready to stand before the judgement seat? Are we ready to welcome the new world? Are you ready to see the old world come to an end? In some ways it is with the coronavirus.

The question for you and I and for the world is not are we ready in the sense that survivalists are ready for the next big war, or earthquake, or flood or fire, or as they were for Y2K in the year 2000. But are we ready for Jesus? Are we ready for the time when the world is judged - when we are judged.

The question is not have we saved enough canned food and toilet paper in our basement shelters - but have we prepared our eternal souls to dwell in heaven?

The question is not whether we have taken our resources and converted them into physical assets, where neither stock market crashes or computer failures can affect them. But whether we have taken our resources and converted them into spiritual assets - the assets that never

pass away, even though all other things will cease.

There are some things that we can take with us - and there are other things that we cannot. The question of Advent is, are we awake? Are we prepared? Are we on the road to readiness?

Our hope is that God will redeem our world. The question is - are we ready to be redeemed? Are we really ready and prepared to live in the Kingdom of God? Are we allowing the potter to form us - into the Creator's clay? Or are we thinking the day of the Lord will never come?

It is coming my friends. Like when we play hide and go seek, and the person who is it yells, "Ready or not, here I come." For us all - ready or not. May you - may I, be alert and awake. And on the road of readiness.