

## **“Through Chaos” based on Mark 13:24-27**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Dec. 3, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Stay awake, Jesus warns us. You do not know when the Lord of the house comes. It could be in the evening, or at midnight or when the rooster crows, or at daybreak. This passage comes right before Jesus’s death on the cross in Mark, and each of those moments are noted in his telling of the story.

It could be at any moment when you might typically be asleep. Jesus says, specifically, that what he says here to his disciples, he means to be said to all – and that is, stay awake. In other words, pay attention and be ready always. Today, we begin the season of Advent, a season of anticipation and of waiting. Historically, this season has been a time of preparation and recommitment, much like Lent before Easter. It’s a time when we take stock of our lives and prepare for the coming of Christ.

There are three ways to look at Christ’s coming, as the monk theologian Bernard said in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. He said the first coming is what we celebrate at Christmas, when Jesus comes in our flesh and our weakness. The second is in our souls when we receive Christ in us, and the third, is in Christ’s return in glory and majesty, when all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.

And so, this week, our readings begin looking forward to that third mode of Christ’s coming. It may seem odd to begin at the end, but that is the traditional focus of this week, because the theme is hope. That’s right. Jesus’s words are not meant to scare us. The call to turn away from sin is not meant to lead us into despair.

No, if there is no hope, there is no need to turn away from sin, if you think about it. If there is nothing to hope for beyond the life we live now, there is no need to worry about sin or repentance. Our only goal then is to stay alive at any cost, without regard to the cost to others, unless their survival impacts ours.

This is the reason we look forward to the end right from the beginning of the church year. However, in doing so, the intent of the faith is not to make us so heavenly minded, that we aren’t worth any earthly good. That is not why we stay awake. We don’t stay awake just because we have to go to heaven. The point of being awake is not so that we are not caught sinning. The point of being awake is so that we can do our job. It is so we can work within the authority of the Lord who is to return.

In addition to the traditional themes of each Advent week – hope, peace, joy, and love – this year, will be focusing on the name “Emmanuel,” which means, “God with us.” To that end, we are adopting themes in a resource from Illustrated Ministry, and we are adapting them for our context, our worship, this season. And so, these themes for each week are all centered on God with us.

The first is this week – through chaos. Then through suffering, through uncertainty, and through whatever our family endures. For all of them, God is with us. And so, this week, we will consider our scripture, thinking about that idea of through chaos, and in light of hope. In reality, this pairing is very important to our faith.

Throughout scripture, the ultimate enemy of God is not Satan. It’s not sin. It’s not even death. The ultimate enemy of God is chaos, which is embodied in Satan, unleashed through sin, through the turning away from God’s order, and the power of death. Chaos is “the nothing” – it is the absence of order, of truth, and of reality. It is that feeling that nothing has any meaning, except survival, and even that feels pointless, apart from the alternative.

The nothing is the feeling that nothing will ever satisfy us, so it's always the next thing that is needed – the next car, the next house, next spouse, that next president, next philosophy, at will solve everything. I've been desiring lately to rewatch the Neverending Story and I should have done that. But I've been thinking of it because of "the nothing," which envelops everything by destroying belief, destroying wonder and hope.

It makes me think of the two poles in our culture drawing us into the same trap as they fight each other. The first being the belief that this world can be perfected by humans, as if there is a perfect system and a scientific solution for every problem. The second being the belief that this world is irredeemable. God will destroy it, so live your best life as you see it, and just escape to heaven.

Both of these viewpoints serve "the nothing." Ultimately, they destroy faith. They destroy hope. They destroy love. What Jesus presents is an antidote to the chaos that threatens us all with destruction. He says that even though there will be suffering, the powers of heaven will be shaken. Shaken up by the Son of Man coming on the clouds in glory. For he will send his angels, which also means his messengers, his followers, to the ends of the earth and the extent of heaven. Indeed, Jesus says that even the heavens will pass away, and so even the angels then may pass away. The earth may pass away, but his words will not.

The word here is logos. This is not just spoken words at the moment. This is his divine order. It's his reason, his own self. That will never pass away, no matter what.

Beloved, the forces of chaos are at work in this world and trying to overcome us. But the Lord is near. The Lord is at your door, seeking you and pursuing you with love. In this season, we do immediately look immediately ahead to our celebration of Christmas, the incarnation, the moment when our God, the eternal Son, came down to be one of us, humbling himself in our limits, born a helpless infant, living as an itinerant preacher. He revealed the fullness of our humanity in him, while revealing also the fullness of our God, and our God's love.

He lived as we live for us. He died for us. Crucified as a rebel against Rome, the same Rome of the Pax Romana that used violence and destruction to keep peace. It is the force of chaos that uses death and our separation from God to impose order, and both Rome and the Judean authorities in their power served this force of chaos. When Jesus was nailed to that tree, they tried to nail the hope of his followers that he was the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Holy One of Israel. But death had no power and for us, he rose again to new life. Restored, he brings humanity out of the clutches of chaos, to give us all new life, by our faith in him, empowered by God's Holy Spirit to love.

Beloved, by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, you have been saved through faith, but salvation is not a reward, as if you had the right faith, accomplished the right works, and now you've earned your salvation, you got your spot with God. Nor is salvation an entitlement, as if you deserve this honor inherently, because you've been willing to intellectually assent to a few ideas. Your salvation (and mine) is a gift. It is the grace of Jesus, the downpayment of which is the Holy Spirit living in us and among us in the church. That is what empowers us to stay awake, and do the work assigned. It is the authority of our Lord.

Chaos may be at work, but Jesus compared his return to a man going on a journey, who gave his servants his full authority, his 'exousia,' meaning what comes from who he is. And he gave to each one their work, their assignments, including the doorkeeper, whose job was to stay awake, to

watch the door for the Lord's return. But what is said to the doorkeeper, to the doorkeepers, is also said to all, in each of their jobs, "Stay awake."

Sisters and brothers, the Lord the Holy Spirit is with you, near to you in the chaos of this world, and still in a new way the Lord the Son has given us work to do and will return. In the end, the Lord our Father, will set all things right, make all things new.

Our job is not to merely keep from sinning until Christ's return, for if that were the case, then the advice might better be stay asleep. For as Martin Luther allegedly said in defense of beer: Beer makes you sleepy, and if asleep you cannot sin, therefore, drink beer and do not sin.

But with all due respect to the apocryphal or actual Martin Luther if he said it, what Jesus is telling us to do is stay awake, to be actively working to reveal him, actively working to share God's love, knowing that even in the chaos the Holy Spirit of God is with you. The Holy Spirit of God is with us, empowering us and protecting us, and ultimately, the powers of sin and death have already been defeated, for in Christ, we know that death will not be the end.

I'll leave you with an example, which should be familiar to most, if not all of us. Let me start by saying that one of the defenses we have in this world against chaos, is our tethering to family, to our parents before us, a spouse, and our children after us. We are tethered also to our friends, to our church, our community, and our faith. These tethers hold us and are part of God's order. But sometimes something snaps one and the forces of chaos have the intent of pulling us away, using that moment to snap more and more of them, until we are free falling, swallowed up, by "the nothing," yes, by the chaos.

About 12 years ago, our beloved Tisha Dedmon had one of those tethers cut, and she lost her son Tripp at the tender age of just 17, in a death by suicide. There is nothing I can imagine that would make me feel more hopeless than losing a child. Nothing that would make me feel like the forces of chaos might win, than losing a child, especially in the manner that Tripp died.

But Tisha held on, and a couple years later met Carol Ann, who lost a critical tether when her father died. I know that feeling of losing a mother and a father and no matter how old you are, you can't help that feeling that the tether is gone. Something that held you is gone.

Now, we may look at these two and their goofy tree girl costumes and think "what fun, they're tree girls." But this year, their theme of "Choose Joy," really hit me in regard to these readings because it speaks to this idea of staying awake.

They came together because the forces of chaos were closing in. Whatever challenge we face in life, we can give in to the chaos, or we can recognize that the Lord is at our door ready to come in. We can choose to answer that call and stay awake, choosing to have hope, choosing joy, choosing to be peacemakers, choosing to love, because in doing so, knowing that God is with us, then the forces of chaos cannot win. Amen.