

IT'S WINTERTIME

Mark 13:24-37

Last Sunday of the Church Year (Series B)

November 24, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 13, verses 24 through 37. In this gospel lesson, Jesus continues to speak of the signs of his appearing. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 13, beginning at verse 24, we read in Jesus' name.

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

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our lives changed this week. Winter is upon us. We all knew it was going to happen, and it got delayed a little bit, which is kind of nice, but it's still a shock to our bodies when it comes. Most of us groaned, while our children rejoiced.

Now winter isn't totally bad. Children like to play in the snow. Snow is fascinating. They can move it around and make things. They can throw their bodies around without getting hurt. It's fun. And for the rest of us, winter can be a time of rest, or, at least, it should be. God has designed the seasons. There's a natural rhythm to the universe, and it's healthy for us to follow it. Just like it's better for our bodies to sleep at night and be awake during the day, it is healthier for us to slow down in the winter and speed up in the summer. It's just following the natural course of God's design. There's less to do. You can't work the ground. You can't do very much work outside. So it's a time to stay inside and rest. So if I can give you just a little bit of pastoral advice—and this is not related to the text at all; I'll get to that stuff in a minute—but if you'll allow me to give you just a little pastoral advice, let winter be a time when you slow down. Play games with your family. Read some books. Read the Bible. Drink some tea. Just rest.

Anyway, now for the important stuff, this week I was thinking about the seasons of the earth and how they teach us about eternity. Winter is the season of death. The trees have all dropped their leaves. The grass has browned and stopped growing. Our gardens are dead. Days are shorter. There's less light. And it's just really, really cold. Winter is the season of death. Summer is the season of life. In the spring, plants will blossom and grow. Then, in the summer, they will bear fruit.

Jesus talks about the signs of his appearance. And it's interesting. He speaks of terrifying cosmic disasters: the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light, and stars falling from heaven. Now what would you think? How would you feel if you saw these things happening? Imagine this. Suppose it's the middle of the day, but, suddenly, it starts getting dark. You look up, and the sun is dimming. The moon is out, but it's not giving off light anymore either, because the sun is no longer giving it light. And imagine the stars fail too. You see them disappear from the sky. What would you think? How would you feel? These are terrifying signs of destruction. Naturally, we might see them as foreboding bad things ahead. But Jesus says these are really signs that summer is near. And we would not know this if he had not told us about it. Because, if you just consider those signs, you would think that it's the end of the world. And it is, but it's not just the end of this world, it's really the beginning of the next. When we see signs that this world is coming to an end, we know that summer is near. So we often speak of the signs of the end. But it might be better to think of them as signs of the beginning. They are signs that summer is near.

Now, if those signs of destruction are really signs that summer is near, what season are we in now? And I don't mean the short seasons of the annual calendar, but the longer season of this age—the scope of human history. It's wintertime. Genesis 3 was the fall into sin, and, ever since then, it has been winter. In our hearts and in the Church, we have a foretaste of summer. But in the world, apart from faith, it is “always winter, but never Christmas” (C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*). And this is all we've ever known in the world. The world is dark, cold, dead, and hopeless.

Some might say that's a pessimistic way of looking at the world. I don't think so. Think about it this way. If what we're experiencing now is summer, then what comes next? Winter. But if this world is really winter, then what comes next? Summer.

Suppose someone had visited North Dakota on Tuesday. And they had never been here before. They land in Grand Forks on Tuesday morning, walk out of the airport, get in a cab, and the driver says, “What a beautiful day!” They might just get out of the cab, back into the airport, and go home. If that were what we consider beautiful, they wouldn't want to know what a bad day is like. So also, this world. This world is the way it is. Love it or hate it, it is what it is, and we know what it is. We experience it every day. And if this is as good as it gets, that's really sad. But if this is the winter, imagine how warm the summer will be. Are there good things in this life? Yes. Are there things worth rejoicing over? Of course. God has given us good things now. But this world is still the winter. And if the world is cold, imagine the warmth of the new creation. And if the world is in darkness, imagine the light to come. And if the world is enveloped in hatred, imagine the love we will experience in the next. Jesus teaches us to look forward to summer. So when you see this world ending, do not be sad. It's just the end of the winter. Do not try to hold onto the snow.

Imagine if you lived in a land that is always covered in snow. You've never seen brown dirt, green grass, or flowers of any color. You've never even heard of such things. Ever since you were born, you thought the snow was the ground. It's all you've ever known. Then, one year,

spring comes, and the snow begins to melt. What would you think? You might think that the ground is disappearing underneath you. How terrifying! But you've never seen the real ground, and it's going to be okay. That's how this world is. It's all we know. So when we see it falling apart, we might be terrified. But it's really just the snow melting. We think this is the ground. We think the sun is true light. But it's not. We think this is life, but it's really death. As Christians, in our hearts and in the Church, we have a foretaste of life, but we have never experienced what it truly means to be alive. The world is convinced this is life, so they hold onto it with everything they've got. But they're really just holding onto death. Let go of this world. Let go of death. And set your hearts on the life to come. It's wintertime, but summer's coming.

The signs Jesus speaks of in this passage, the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light, and the stars falling from heaven, these are signs of the very end.

Last Sunday we considered the first part of Mark 13. There, Jesus spoke of signs that remind us the end is coming: false teachers, wars, earthquakes, famines, and persecution of Christians. He warned us that those things must take place, **"but the end is not yet"** (13:7). Those are all signs that the end is coming.

He calls it **"tribulation"** (13:24). Some end times teachers say there will be a seven-year tribulation right before Jesus appears. And it seems, from what Jesus says, that things will continue to go from bad to worse until his appearance, but the tribulation Jesus describes has been happening since the time of the apostles. And we don't know how much worse things will get. In America, we're mostly sheltered and, therefore, at least a little bit blind to it. Life is not very hard for Christians here, so it seems silly to call it a tribulation. But in other parts of the world, Christians face persecution severe enough to make them believe the end must be very, very near. And they might be right. We should not assume that there needs to be some worse tribulation before Jesus appears. He can appear at any moment. There has already been enough evil in this world that God can say at any time, "That's enough." All the signs of the tribulation remind us that this world is passing away and Jesus will appear. So we must be on guard and keep awake (13:33).

But in this passage, Jesus speaks more of what will happen at the very end. It's after that tribulation (13:24). **"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"** (13:24-25).

Many end times passages are figurative or symbolic. I don't think this is one of those passages. This should be understood literally, but we also should not go beyond what Jesus says. That is, we don't have to predict why the sun will not give its light. The first thing we will see is some kind of failure in the sky. Apparently the sun, moon, and stars will fail in some way. Maybe this means that the sun will be destroyed. If that happens, it will become abundantly obvious to all of the world that this world is ending. But whatever this looks like, exactly, this is the moment when we will go from "soon" to "now." For now, we live with the expectation of "soon." And we will live with that expectation right up until the moment the lights in the sky fail. At that moment, "soon" will become "now." Jesus tells us this so that we will not be terrified in that moment. Then, after the failure in the sky, **"They will see the Son of Man"**—that's Jesus—**"coming in clouds with great power and glory"** (13:26).

The mention of the clouds is one of the reasons we should understand this literally, and not symbolically. When Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection, "He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). Then two angels assured his apostles that Jesus "will come in the same way as [they] saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). So, since we

know the part about the cloud is a literal statement, we should also think that the part about the sun, moon, and stars is literal.

“Then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (13:27). It’s kind of fun to imagine what this will be like. Jesus doesn’t paint the whole picture for us, so it could be different than the picture in my head. But my imagination has angels flying all over the world and giving rides to all of God’s saints. Maybe that’s how it will be. Maybe not. But somehow, the angels will “gather his elect.”

This is also when the resurrection of the dead will occur. Jesus doesn’t mention the resurrection in this passage, but we have several other passages that connect the resurrection of the dead with Jesus’ appearance and the end of the world (Matt. 25:1-13; 1 Cor. 15:22-24; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:16).

This is what will happen at the very end: the lights in the sky will fail. Jesus will descend on a cloud. And the angels will gather you, his elect, from wherever you are. Even if you are in your grave, they will gather you to Jesus Christ. And together, we will behold our glorious Savior, and we will appear with him in glory.

We would like to know more about this. Or, at least, I would. And I assume most Christians want to know more. We especially want to know when this will happen. Jesus does not give us further details, but what he does tell us is fairly simple. Jesus will appear. He will raise the dead. He will judge all mankind. He will transform his believing saints and bring them into everlasting life. He will also condemn unbelievers and cast them into everlasting contempt. This is fairly simple.

There are, of course, some passages that are difficult to understand. Part of that is because we have not yet seen how they will be fulfilled. There’s one statement in this text that can cause some confusion. It’s where Jesus says, “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (13:30).

Some have taken this to mean that Jesus would appear during the lifetime of his apostles. And, at first, that seems like a reasonable way to understand it. However, that didn’t happen. That generation died off. Many generations have lived and died since then. So skeptics like to pounce on this and say that Jesus was a fraud. And if Jesus had failed to rise from the dead, then we should probably agree with them. But the fact is, Jesus did rise from the dead. Therefore, we should believe that he knows what he’s talking about, even if it doesn’t make sense to us.

Here’s the thing: Jesus uses the word “generation” twenty-six times in the gospels. But he doesn’t seem to use it to refer to people of a similar age, like we talk about baby-boomers or millennials. But he often uses it to refer to the common, faithless attitude of his Jewish opponents. He refers to an “evil and adulterous generation” (Matt. 12:39; 16:4), a “faithless and twisted generation” (Matt. 17:17; Luke 9:41), and an “adulterous and sinful generation” (Mark 8:38). And he didn’t mean that everyone of a certain age was an unbeliever. Nor did he mean that all of the Jews were unbelievers. Rather, he was lamenting this common, unbelieving attitude of his opponents. Of the twenty-some other times Jesus uses the word “generation,” not a single use is positive, or even neutral. They are all negative. In fact, in one place he even distinguishes between this “generation” and “the sons of light” (Luke 16:8). Jesus does not even group his believers in with this “generation,” even though they were the same age. So the “generation” Jesus speaks of spans all of human history, from Adam to the end of the world. The point is that this unbelieving and hostile attitude against Jesus will persist until the very end.

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That's the reality of this world. They hated our Lord. They hate us too. But we will not hate them in return. We will not fight them the way they fight us. Our Lord Jesus loved them. He loved us. Remember, we were of the world too. And if Jesus had not loved us, we would still be of the world and on the path of death. But he rescued us by his sacrificial death and resurrection on the third day. And he desires for all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). So when the world hates us, we will endure, as our Lord did, and we will love, as our Lord loved, so that more of the world might be saved.

Remember, this world is not your home. You belong to another. So do not fall in love with this world. When spring comes, and the frozen winter of this world begins to melt away, do not grieve. All it means is that summer is coming. Or when your body begins to fail, and you make an early departure from this world, take heart. Your Savior will come for you. It's wintertime, but summer's coming. Amen.

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘**Surely I am coming soon.**’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen” (Rev. 22:20-21).