

In the last week our words have changed from "Happy Thanksgiving" to "Have a Merry Christmas," or in strictly secular terms, "Happy Holidays." And then we come here into church, the root of this whole Christmas idea, and the words from Jesus are, "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 of the heavens will be shaken."

What on earth is going on here? Aren't there plenty of nice Christmas passages in the Bible? Or if you're a purist to the church calendar, aren't there any nicer *Advent* passages than this?!? If Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas, then what does this have to do with the birth of Christ at all?

These are all very valid questions, but it gets worse. What are we to make of this jarring little statement from Jesus: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place"?

Let's start with that and then look at what the rest of this means for our Christmas preparations.

Critics of Christianity hear Jesus' statement about this generation not passing away and immediately go to the most obvious answer - Jesus was wrong. It's then only one small step further to then say the whole of his ministry was a fraud. Think that's jumping to big conclusions way too fast, but statements like this can send a big jolt of doubt into our beliefs. Was Jesus wrong? Is the Bible wrong?

Part of our problem with Jesus' statement is that it is so vague. What does Jesus mean when he says, "These things?" Does he mean the stuff he talked about earlier like the sun and moon and stars falling? Or does he mean something else?

Also, what does he mean when he says, "this generation"? That is variously translated as "this generation" or "this age", or "this race" or other things. Clearly we have a passage we aren't comfortable with.

Rather than trying to explain it away by cleverly redefining words, let's say these things: It is true that the earliest Christians expected Jesus to return during their lifetimes. You can sense that throughout the New Testament. Obviously that didn't happen. That doesn't make the Bible wrong. It does mean that the expectations of the earliest Christians were wrong.

That really shouldn't surprise us though. In fact we should almost laugh at their expectations. Jesus says in the very next breath, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." That should be what the earliest Christians (and ourselves) took away from this.

However, Jesus wasn't going to walk away from the whole issue by saying basically "I don't know." No, he decided to use the issue of the end of time to teach his followers something important, and that is: what to do in the meantime.

Jesus didn't want his followers standing around twiddling their thumbs. He didn't want them to start staring up at the

sky every two minutes to see if the sun had moved abnormally far. He wanted them to get a move on with the work of sharing the gospel across the world. It was work that had to get done. And there were only 12 of them! That's a pretty big advertising campaign to pull off with a pretty small staff! They had to work. And they had to work hard and fast.

The image that Jesus uses to get them moving is language they would have been familiar with: the prophet Daniel. In Jesus' day it was common for Jews to study Daniel to foretell the day when the Romans would be overthrown and when the end of time would come. Jesus picks up on this and uses it as his framework to goad them into action. As he picks up on ideas from Daniel he adapts them in a way that is interesting.

Daniel's visions, like most teachings about the end of time, include great and terrible things happening on earth and in the sky. There is judgment for the bad and redemption for the good. Jesus, however, dropped the punishment for the bad side of it. He only talks about salvation for the faithful. When you heard the gospel read you may have imagined the

punishment side into it all, but if you did you should realize it wasn't really there.

Commentator Pheme Perkins picks up on this when she notes, "Critics of Christians' hope for an end-time judgment have often accused Christians of fostering an ethic based on resentment. The lowly, unsuccessful have-nots of the world are encouraged to fantasize about the eventual destruction of the powerful or successful persons in society. Mark's end-time scenario provides no such opportunity. The fate of those who persecute witnesses to the gospel is never described at all. These prophecies formulate a message of hope, which encourages the disciple to endure the hardships of testimony to the gospel. Those who do so will be gathered into the people of God, the elect." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 8, pg. 692)

That may seem like a big intellectual plateful to swallow, but it gets to the heart of why we have this passage at the beginning of Advent. Jesus intended his words about the end of time to be a message of hope, not a detailed prediction of destruction.

Did you notice when it was read how much human action is involved in bringing about the end of time? None. It is God's doing in God's own way and in God's own time. Jesus wants us to know that the future is in God's hands. It is secure. When Jesus says about the sun and the moon and the stars he isn't so much saying that their orbits are going to be knocked out of whack, and that's going to be a sign of the end of time; but that God's power is greater than even the greatest forces of nature. Nothing can stop God.

The key remains to keep awake. Keep alert. Be ready. Don't become complacent in your faith. Don't put off until tomorrow a good work that you can do today. (Okay, maybe washing windows should be an exception!)

With two thousand years between us and the time of Christ it is easy to assume these words about watchfulness have no significance for us. Yet we are fools to take them lightly. Even if the sun and moon show no signs of altering their orbit, and they don't do so for millions of years, we need to keep our sense of urgency. There remains a lot of work to be done. Giving up or resting on our laurels is not an option.

The world needs the message of God's grace as much as ever. It is a message of hope. Our society is becoming ever more selfish and ever more individualistic. People consume vast amounts of goods and services yet feel hollow and depressed. Billions of dollars will be spent this Christmas by desperate people hoping to find some sense of fulfillment in the holidays. They will fail. It is easy to celebrate Christmas without Christ.

The little baby in the manger, whose birth we will soon celebrate again, is the embodiment of God's love; and is a gift freely given by God to us. This gift is our hope and our salvation. May you be filled with that hope to overflowing so that you may share it generously and joyously in the weeks to come. May God bless you to be a blessing to many others. Amen