

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
"The End of the Age"
Scripture: Mark 13:1-8, 24-37
Rev. Steve Filyk
March 29 2020

Do you remember when you first heard
about the coronavirus, about COVID-19?

Maybe it was January 23rd when China imposed a lockdown in Wuhan.
Or maybe it was a week later
when the WHO declared a global health emergency.

I'll be honest that despite the news reports and warnings,
Despite the social distancing,
the runs on toilet paper
the business closures,
it didn't seem all that real to me.

That is until I heard this story from our own city,
A story about a man in his 40s who contracted the virus:

"[Keith Elliott] was in good health prior to March 12.
Elliott, who had not been travelling,
went home sick from work that day,
and his symptoms worsened from that point on...

[His wife Dana] says she has never witnessed her husband
in a worse condition...

On Thursday, March 12, Keith woke up with a sore throat.
His symptoms worsened and by that Saturday

Dana decided it was time to call 8-1-1 to find out if Keith should be tested for COVID-19.

“Based on his symptoms and all the questions that they ask, they told me that they didn’t figure he had COVID because he hadn’t been out of the country and hadn’t really been in contact with anybody known to be sick.”

Keith’s condition continued to decline and by Monday, March 16 he was taken to the emergency room at Royal Inland Hospital.

“He saw a doctor and they checked him out, listened to his lungs, they did an X-ray of his lungs as well and they said his X-ray was clear, so based on what his symptoms were and the fact that his X-ray was clear they said that it was just the flu,” Dana said.

As a precaution, he was tested for COVID-19. [The following Friday] his results came back positive.

In the meantime, Keith had gotten worse.

“He was having sweats, shivering and his body was just shaking,” Dana said.

“He was groaning in his sleep and he had a headache and a fever. His eyes were burning, he said his lungs were burning...”

Dana says it's time to take self-isolation seriously,
and be aware that the virus is in Kamloops."ⁱ

Did you ever imagine we'd be facing a pandemic
In the BC interior?

It has arrived.

No doubt it will touch many of our lives.

PAUSE

Today's Gospel lesson is a couple of selections
Drawn from Mark chapter 13,
the part of Mark's Gospel known as the "Little Apocalypse".

It is given this title, because like other apocalyptic literature,
It focuses on the end of the way things are,
And the establishment of God's kingdom,
And use vivid symbolic imagery.

It doesn't just emulate other apocalyptic literature
but actually references other apocalyptic passages:
Isaiah is referenced and the Book of Daniel
is quoted directly three times.ⁱⁱ

PAUSE

Today's passage begins with a discussion of the Temple.
We are told that as Jesus was walking away from the Temple
One of his disciples commented:

“Teacher, look at that stonework! Those buildings!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Herod the Great began reconstructed the Second Temple
In the decade following 20 BC.

It was the most ambitious of Herod's many projects

(think also of the fortress at Masada and the port city of Caesarea).

“It took 10,000 men ten years just to build the retaining walls
around the Temple Mount...

The Western Wall (aka the Wailing Wall
which some of you may have visited)
is merely part of that 500-meter-long retaining wall
that was designed to hold a huge man-made platform
that could accommodate twenty-four football fields.

When it was completed,
it was the world's largest functioning religious site
and until today it remains the largest man-made platform
in the world.”^{iv}

But if the temple complex is large
Then so are the pieces used to build it.

“The 'Western Stone', is the biggest stone
of the Western Wall in Jerusalem...

It is recorded as one of the heaviest objects
ever lifted by humans
without the assistance of any machinery...

The stone, located in the wall section north of Wilson's Arch,
is 13.6 meters (44.6 feet) long and 3 metres (9.8 feet) high
and has an estimated width of 3.3 meters (10.8 feet).”^v

When Jesus was walking away from the Temple
His disciples expressed awe at the complex.
“Teacher, look at that stonework!”^{vi}

And Jesus replied: “You’re impressed by this grandiose architecture?
There’s not a stone in the whole works
that is not going to end up in a heap of rubble.”^{vii}

You can imagine that after such a declaration
the disciples would have been astonished...
and would have a few questions.

To see the immensity of the stones today
Makes it hard to believe in anything but permanence.

And yet all that is earthly fades.
Who would have believed that the Twin Towers
Would one day be erased from the Manhattan skyline?

Despite all the posturing of power and permanency,
Nothing earthly endures.

PAUSE

In case you were wondering, Jesus' prediction,
his prophecy proves to be true.

“In the year AD 69 one Roman emperor succeeded another
—four in all, Nero, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian—
each time with violence, murder and civil war.

And as Vespasian made his way to Rome to receive the crown,
his adopted son Titus entered Jerusalem,
burnt the Temple, destroyed the city
and crucified thousands of Jews.”^{viii}

But if earthly kingdoms and monuments will all fade and disappear,
What about the reign of God that Jesus promised.
When will the Son of Man be exalted over all,
And receive his kingdom?

Will that even happen?
If Jesus' promise about Jerusalem was fulfilled,
Then what about his reign?

Jesus told his disciples that there would be waiting involved.
Even before the destruction of the Temple there would be
'wars and rumors of wars', earthquakes,
famines, persecutions.^{ix}

But according to Jesus this was just the beginning of the 'labor pains'
that are signs of his kingdom coming.

After that time,
After all those horrible occurrences,
History will finally be fulfilled.

And it will be a bigger event than the visit of the Queen
Or the arrival of a foreign dignitary.
Instead of fireworks there will be a meteor shower.

The stars will fall from the sky.
“[People] will see the Son of Man
coming in clouds with great power and glory.

And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds,
from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”^x

It is hard to imagine Jesus’ coming.
The disciples struggled to envision the fall of Jerusalem.
Many of us didn’t dream that COVID-19
Would be in our own town.

But Jesus has promised that the Son of Man will be victorious.
That God’s kingdom will appear in its fullness.
That we will finally be liberated
from a world marked by so much darkness and evil.

So what are we to do,
until the Son of Man comes “in clouds with great power and glory”?

We are to be on guard and keep watch.

Some people spend a lot of time pouring over newspapers
Trying to connect world events with what Jesus foretold.

“Besides pretending to know more than the Son does,
date fixers often have little sense of responsibility for the world...

In contrast to these...
Jesus speaks of responsibilities imposed by the master
who left us in charge here.”^{xi}

As we read in verse 34:

“It’s like a man going away:
He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge,
each with their assigned task,
and tells the one at the door to keep watch.”^{xii}

Our call is not to a passive waiting,
Or to a fixation on prediction,
But to an active faithfulness in our calling,
Even as we watch.

We are to keep up with our assigned tasks
Even as we pray “Come, Lord Jesus.”

I ran into another story about COVID-19 this week,
Not about someone suffering from it,
But someone fighting it.

“While Canadians scattered all around the world [were] desperately tried to fly back home, Bev Kauffeldt did the opposite — she made urgent plans to fly into the eye of the COVID-19 storm.

Now, the Whitehorse-born, Salmon Arm, B.C.-raised former Calgarian is the Samaritan’s Purse team lead for a 68-bed field hospital in the parking lot of a large hospital in Cremona, a city in northern Italy, just south of Milan...

“People here are just devastated, they’re very sad,” said Kauffeldt... “They can’t believe this is happening to them,” she said.

“What’s very sad is you hear stories of people being admitted to the hospital with COVID-19 and then they find out that one of their loved ones died at home.

Or there’s no family who are allowed to come to see them.

It’s very, very difficult, they’re sick, they’re afraid and they’re often grieving from a great loss.”

Samaritan’s Purse airlifted its field hospital to Italy on March 17 using the relief organization’s DC-8 cargo plane, and with the help of the Italian military erected their structures quickly.

By Wednesday night, every one of their beds
was filled with patients suffering from COVID-19...

“As a faith-based organization, we’re here in Italy in Jesus’ name.
We can pray with our patients,
we read with them, we ask them to tell us about themselves
and their family and how they’re doing.

They just want someone to talk to.”[she said]^{xiii}

Isn’t that interesting.

This emergency organizer is telling us
How the people suffering from COVID-19
need social connection,
They need someone to talk to.

You may not have the medical skills to help someone get on a respirator.
But in this time of pandemic we all have the ability
To connect with others and find out how they are doing.

We can all write a letter.
We can all pick up the phone.

And that’s good because while we have different vocations,
We have all been assigned the task of loving our neighbors.

May we be found doing this,
When the Son of Man returns in power and glory.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.

ⁱ “Kamloops family in quarantine after father’s positive COVID-19 diagnosis” *CFJC Today*

Mar 24, 2020 cfjctoday.com/2020/03/23/kamloops-family-in-quarantine-after-fathers-positive-covid-19-diagnosis/

ⁱⁱ Lamar Williamson Jr. Mark 236

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 13:1 MSG

^{iv} Ken Spiro “History Crash Course #31: Herod the Great” www.aish.com/jl/h/cc/48942446.html

^v “Western Stone” <https://www.megalithicbuilders.com/asia/israel/jerusalem-western-stone>

^{vi} Mark 13:1 MSG

^{vii} Mark 13:2 MSG

^{viii} NT Wright Mark 183

^{ix} Mark 13:7ff NIV

^x Mark 13:26-27 NIV

^{xi} Lamar Williamson Jr. Mark 241

^{xii} Mark 13:34

^{xiii} Licia Corbella “Corbella: Canadians helping in the centre of Italy's COVID-19 storm” March 26, 2020
calgaryherald.com/opinion/corbella-canadians-helping-in-the-centre-of-italys-covid-19-storm/