

Sermon 29 November 2020

My Hope is in You Lord - Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

Songs: Rend the heavens Robin Mark: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtl6xV951Uw>

My Life is in you Lord. [My life is in You, Lord - hillsong - YouTube](#)

What a year this has been! When we gathered in church this time last year (as we were able to) no-one could have foreseen what lay ahead in 2020.

None of us had heard of the Corona Virus or of Covid-19. We were caught up early in the year as the virus raced through the whole world. I looked at my notes from the first recorded sermon we made on the day before our three-week lockdown commenced in March. I noted that at that time, there were 454,456 cases in the world and 20,543 deaths in the world. In South Africa there were 709 cases and as yet no deaths.

As I prepared for this sermon I noted that there were 6,166,309 cases in the world and 1,416,073 deaths.

In South Africa there were 772,252 cases and 21,083 deaths so far¹.

The impact of this pandemic has been enormous throughout the world and in our country. Many have died from this virus and many are still undergoing treatment. The economic impact has been enormous, with perhaps the greater impact still to come. Many have lost their jobs, their income and their businesses. Many are homeless and struggling to feed themselves.

One of the most difficult aspects has been physical isolation. The fact that we've not been able to gather with our family members, friends and our church congregation. It has been good that we can still gather on a virtual platform and, recently, every second week at the church.

But many of you have indicated that one of the things that you have missed the most is gathering together with no limitations and the ability to lift our voices in song as we worship our mighty God.

This has been a time of exile. A time of loneliness and at best a time of treading water in what seems to be a sea of uncertainty.

¹ As at 25 November 2020 from www.worldometers.info

This is a time when we might, like Isaiah, cry to God:

“64 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! 2 As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!”

The gospel of Mark was written in a time of tremendous turmoil and uncertainty. Mark wrote his gospel just before, or at the time of, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The fire in Rome in 64AD, possibly started by Nero but blamed on the Christians unleashed a time of widespread persecution of Christ followers. Then the believers saw the temple destroyed, loved ones executed and their country in ruins. It was a time when the believers needed hope beyond themselves.

Today is the first Sunday in the new church calendar.

The church calendar starts with the season of Advent with the first four Sundays before we celebrate the birth of Christ.

On these four Sundays we traditionally look at hope, faith, joy, and peace.

Today we start by looking at hope.

This is the very cornerstone of our faith. And this is not just an expression of wishing like: “I hope it will rain this week,” or “I hope I can get this job done”.

This is assured hope based on the gospel message - based on the teachings of Jesus.

Our passage this morning comes from Mark 13 verses 24 to 37. This is a difficult but powerful passage and one very appropriate for the times in which we now live.

In order to consider these verses, we need to look at the start of the chapter. The chapter is headed “Signs of the End of the Age” and starts off by recording that as Jesus left the temple one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

Jesus, replied: “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another, everyone will be thrown down.”

This is followed by Peter, James, John and Andrew asking Jesus privately to be told when these things would happen and what would be the signs that they were about

to happen. In Matthew's Gospel² it is clear that the disciples thought that the destruction of the Temple would be one of the events that ushered in the end of times.

Jesus goes on to talk about both the end of the ages, and about the destruction of the temple.

There is no short answer given by Jesus.

He did not say "Before this generation passes away the Temple will be destroyed. But that will not be the end of the ages. The end of the ages will be heralded by my coming again in clouds with great power and glory. No one, other than God, knows when that time will be".

If the disciples were expecting a comforting message that all would be fine in the short term, they must've been dismayed and confused.

In order to understand the verses that we will be looking at today, it is necessary to go back and consider what Jesus said. This appears in verses 5 to 23.

- Jesus warned the disciples about those who would try to deceive them, claiming that they were the Messiah.
- The disciples were warned about wars and rumours of wars, which would happen, but they were not to be alarmed as "the end is still to come". This points to the Roman persecution and invasion which would happen, but, says Jesus, the end is still to come.
- The disciples are warned that nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom and they will be earthquakes in various places and famines, and these would be the beginning of the birth pains. Jesus here referring to happenings before the end of the ages. The rabbis had taught about "birth pains" being trials and tribulations that the nation would experience before the coming of the Messiah.
- The disciples are then warned about persecution they will face, being flogged, arrested and put on trial. The disciples to preach the gospel in words given to them at that time by the Holy Spirit.
- Families would be split with brother betraying brother, father betraying children and children rebelling against their parents. The disciples would be hated because of Jesus, but standing firm they would be saved.

² Matthew 24:3: "as Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the signs of your coming and of the end of the age?"

- The prophecy of Daniel about the temple being desecrated and a Pagan altar being erected on the temple site³ would be fulfilled and it would be a time of extreme danger. When this happened, the followers were to flee without pausing to collect anything as these would be “days of distress, unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world.”
- But Jesus said that the Lord would cut short those days for the sake of the elect, for otherwise no one would survive.
- And Jesus concluded by repeating that there would be those who would deceive his followers who were to be on their guard.

And then the words: “I have told you everything ahead of time.” And here the reference to “time” refers both to the destruction of the temple and the end of the ages.

As I said, if the disciples were looking for a comforting answer they would have been disappointed, confused and in despair.

But Jesus did not stop there, as we see from verses 24 to 37 being our passage for this morning.

Why does Mark include this foretelling or prophecy of Jesus?

In the first place, of course, because this was what Jesus had said.

But I think that this was included because Mark knew of the extreme tribulations that followers of Christ were suffering and the devastating persecution as well as the fall of Jerusalem that was to come.

Mark wanted to convey the words of Jesus, so that his followers would be warned of the destruction of the temple but would also know that there was hope beyond that and beyond their current circumstances.

So, let us consider what Jesus said to the disciples. He starts off by quoting this prophecy by Isaiah:⁴

“But in those days, following that distress, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

³ [Daniel 9:25-27](#) and [Matthew 24:15](#).

⁴ [Isaiah 13:10](#). See also [Isaiah 24:21-23](#); [34:4](#); [Ezekiel 32:7-8](#); [Joel 2:10, 31, 3:15](#); and [Amos 8:9](#).

The reference here to “in those days” was a common Old Testament expression having to do with the end time.⁵

Startling, dramatic and frightening changes to nature are described and then Jesus says:

“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”

Jesus here refers to himself as the Son of Man. This title was Jesus' most common title for himself and is used some 80 times in the Gospels. It is never used by anyone else but Jesus.⁶ The statement is further that Jesus would come with great power and glory.

This echoes Daniel:⁷

“13 “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

A similar reference was recorded by John in Revelation:⁸

“7 “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.”

“At that time men 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.”⁹

This is the prophecy by Jesus, and the promise by Jesus that he will come again. And it is this promise that Mark wanted to share with the readers of his letter, and shares with us today.

⁵ Footnote in the NIV Study Bible page 1518. See for example [Jeremiah 3:16, 18; 31:29; 33:15-16; Joel 3:1 and Zechariah 8:23](#)

⁶ Footnote in the NIV Study Bible page 1507.

⁷ [Daniel 7:13](#).

⁸ Revelation 1:7.

⁹ See [Zechariah 2:6](#).

No matter how difficult our circumstances are, there is more than just the time that we will spend on this earth.

John van de Laar writes this¹⁰:

“Trauma comes to us all in big and small ways. No one gets through life without scars. And it can be very hard to believe that the universe is on a trajectory toward truth, goodness, and beauty when we are in agony.

But if we can learn to lift our eyes beyond our suffering, even just for a few moments at a time, we can begin to see that there is more going on than just our pain.”

Then Jesus concludes this teaching with two further thoughts. The first is a lesson from the fig tree. The second is that the day and the hour of his return is unknown.

In regard to the first thought Jesus says this: “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.”

I believe Jesus is reminding the disciples that there are different seasons and cycles.

New life comes in spring and as summer approaches, as we are experiencing right now in our city. The beautiful Jacarandas blooming are an example of this. The Jacarandas herald that winter is over, spring is here and summer is on us.

Jesus says in the same way that as the disciples and his followers see the signs that he has described that these things will be right at the door. He has described two sets of circumstances: the first is the persecution and fall of the temple. He says that “this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” This could certainly have referred to the fall of the temple which took place in the generation of his disciples. Writers have indicated that if the reference is to the second coming of Christ, “generation” might indicate either the Jewish people as a race who were promised existence to the very end. Or it might refer to the future generation alive at the beginning of these things. It does not mean that Jesus had a mistaken notion he was going to return immediately.¹¹

Jesus promises that while heaven and earth will pass away, his words will never pass away.

¹⁰ Love Life-And Advent and Christmas Journey: John van de Laar page 8.

¹¹ Footnote in NIV Study Bible to Luke 21: 32 on page 1579.

In regard to the second thought Jesus uses a parable to teach us. He says it is like a man going away who leaves his house and put his servants in charge. Each one has tasks assigned to him or her and he tells them that they are to keep watch. Then Jesus says that they are to keep watch because they do not know when the owner of the house may come back. It may be at any time at any hour on any day.

“If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

And he gives this instruction after having told the disciples that no one, not even the angels in heaven, nor he himself knows the day or hour but only the Father.

I said that this passage is a difficult one but the instruction given is, I believe, clear. I think that the point of this passage being considered at this time of advent is that we are to look both to the birth of Jesus as well as to the second coming of Jesus.

And we are to do so with assured hope.

Jesus had spent his time with his disciples and his followers here on earth, starting with the call: “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”¹² And this was followed by all of his teaching on how we are to live. And that is how we are to live right here and now, in the anticipation of his coming again. How we are to respond to the gospel message by carrying out those tasks assigned to us.

We are to hold the image of Jesus overcoming evil. We are to hold that image of Jesus in the vision of Daniel that I quoted - of Jesus returning to God's throne room and receiving honour for faithfully fulfilling his mission of bringing God's reign to earth.¹³

Hold this picture as you remember that you are a daughter of God. That you are a son of God. And give thanks for who you are and what Jesus has done for you. Giving thanks for this, and for even the smallest of things that you experience on a daily basis, will allow you to lift your head, and to look up and beyond your challenging circumstances.

And we learn from the fig tree. The tree grows from a seed, has life, but will die. But this will be followed by the birth of a new tree, as one of its seeds germinates. We may not find it easy or pain-free to contemplate the end of our lives on this earth, but it is

¹² [Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15.](#)

¹³ John van de Laar - Love Life page 9.

powerful to imagine a new life beyond the challenges we face in this pandemic and will face in the years to come. Take time to pray into about this.

And importantly, the fig tree tells us that there will be signs of new life around us.

And while the signs will include signs in nature like a baby Impala wobbling as it takes its first steps after its mother, and fruit appearing on trees, we are to be watchful for other signs.

Signs of random acts of kindness.

Signs of compassion shown to you and opportunities for you to show compassion to others. Moments of light that appear in the crowding darkness. The chance to share laughter with a friend until tears roll down your cheeks. The chance to give something, or something of you to your neighbour.

So, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus this Christmas hold in your mind the assured hope of Jesus coming again.

We are living in a time of exile, prisoners in a way, but we are what Zechariah described as: "Prisoners of hope."¹⁴

The more I thought about that phrase, the more powerful I found it. While it may feel that we are restricted and detained by our circumstances, we do have hope. Zechariah wrote this describing that our king would come, but that we have hope of restoration that will be greater than we can imagine. His words:

"9 Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 12 Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you."

"If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone:' Watch'!"

Gordon Hay

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¹⁴ From Love Life by John van de Laar at page 9.