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November 29, 2017

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
First Sunday of Advent, Year B

Mark 13:[1-8] 24-37

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The beginning of our gospel text this morning reads much like the headlines of our current time.

- “Many will come in my name,” Jesus says, “and lead many astray.” In our day it’s hard to know who to believe, who to follow, and which news sources to trust.
- There will be “wars and rumors of wars”, “nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.” Today’s rumors include nuclear weapons and other means of mass destruction.
- “There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famine.” Recent natural disasters of every kind have left many without access to the basic needs of life.

All of these predictions are seen as signs of the end of the world—at least for somebody. And even though sometimes war and other threats seem far from us in this part of the world, this year our Montana neighbors faced the devastation of wildfires and drought.

Life changes happen. And when they happen to us our first reaction is to think we can’t recover, that our world is ending. Sometimes we see these events on the horizon, and other times we are blindsided. Even the rumor or possibility of change can rock our world.

I remember my first year of teaching. I had a class with several particularly challenging behavior issues. I lacked confidence in myself so I asked my principal to come observe, with the idea that she would give me some ideas to make things better. Instead, after several visits, she told me that she was considering not renewing my contract for the coming year.

I was shocked! I had spent years preparing for this career and it was very possible I would bomb out in my first year! It felt like my world was coming to an end.

I’m sure you have had moments like that, too, times when you thought your world was ending. Maybe you moved and left everything and everyone familiar behind. An accident or difficult diagnosis for you or a loved one can shatter our world. A divorce or breakup of an important relationship does that too. We think we know what the future holds and all of a sudden that future is rocked to the core and we are left shocked and confused.

This is how the disciples probably felt when Jesus told them that the temple would be thrown down. In fact, it is likely this had already happened when Mark’s gospel account was written around the year 70. The Jews and those who followed Jesus—the Savior, the Promised Messiah—were wondering what the future held for them now that Rome had fully conquered their sacred space.

Now why would we have such dismal scripture readings in the season of Advent? Isn't this the season of hope, promise, peace, and even joy? It is so easy to focus on the dramatic and difficult parts of a passage when we read the Bible. But threaded throughout this morning's reading is gospel—there is “good news”!

At the end of the first section in verse 8, after Jesus talks about the wars and earthquakes and famine, he says, “This is but the beginnings of the birth pangs.” All those tragedies and frightening events are the signs of new life! There's a reason giving birth is called “labor,” it's difficult and even painful. But through that labor—and any of the painful events in our lives—God is also at work creating the possibility for change, providing opportunities for us to begin again.

Later on, in verse 29, Jesus tells us that these events are signs of HOPE that Christ is near, which means he is near to us NOW. God does not abandon us in our world-ending moments, but enters into them with us.

In verse 26 we have the promise that “The Son of Man” is coming! And then later on he tells a story about a person who leaves his servants in charge while he is away, “each with his work” to do. In the midst of our troubles we have our work to do while we WAIT for Christ to be revealed.

We still have people to care for, or treatments or therapy, or simply getting up in the morning and moving through the day with whatever tasks are before us. Our waiting during these seasons is an active waiting, living in the present, trusting that Christ is coming to save us.

And so, Jesus says twice, we are to keep alert, keep awake, to live with expectancy for Christ to show up. And when he does show up, that will bring unexpected joy!

Now one of the devastating, world-ending moments I didn't mention earlier was death. The part of Mark's gospel we heard this morning is the part just before Jesus will go to the cross. If the disciples were worried about what the destruction of the temple would mean for their lives, the crucifixion of the Lord would be even more confusing and distressing for them.

But it is on the cross when God's most powerful act of salvation takes place.

Jesus' death was not the end of the world, and neither are the deaths we experience in our lives. Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” That, perhaps, is the greatest news of this passage!

When our world seems to be ending that is when Christ shows up—often in surprising ways—bringing words of hope and new life and possibilities to begin again.

When I thought I might not only be out of a job but had failed in my career choice, Christ showed up. He showed up in the other teachers who rallied around me with encouragement and ideas. My mother who was also a teacher provided support and

guidance. Looking back, Christ showed up in the grace shown by my principal who gave me a second chance. And over time I came to see that that season of my life was part of the birthing of a new career of teaching in the church.

Christ's words of forgiveness, love, and God's covenant commitment to us will remain, even when it seems like the world is ending.

The Word of God is where we find our strength, our steady ground, our assurance that in the end, Christ is near. He comes to us where we are, and he comes to us as we are, with the gifts of hope, promise, peace, and even joy as God gives birth to new life for us.

This is the good news we have to share with the world, because sometimes Jesus shows up in us!

Thanks be to God! Amen