

Life As God Knows It

Matthew 24:1-14

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 19, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ²Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴Jesus answered them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁵For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Messiah!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: ⁸all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

⁹“Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. ¹⁰Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹²And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:1-14, NRSV)



I went on my news feed the other day and immediately wished I hadn't. It was one item of bad news after another. I like to imagine that faithful journalists are looking for good news to report as well, but I also understand that they can't ignore the bad news and there just seems to be a whole lot of bad news these days. I've never been a boxer, but I can imagine what it must be like to be cornered in the ring by a superior opponent who just keeps raining down punches – right

hook, left cross, jab to the ribs, uppercut to the chin. That's what the news feels like these days.

A global pandemic that has altered life as we know it in so many ways. The staggering toll of human loss. Disappointment after disappointment. And then just when it seems like we're going to turn the corner, we're back to square one. When will it end? On top of that, the racial tension and division that has always been present has been painfully exposed in the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, and other. On top of that, political division is straining our unity as a nation. It's as bad as I remember it in my lifetime. On top of that, the economic fallout from all this has so many people reeling. And we haven't even touched on the personal hardship that many of you have faced recently. Our own church has experienced so much loss this season. Right hook, left cross, jab to the ribs, uppercut to the chin. It's overwhelming.

Believe it or not, Jesus can relate. Just before the passage we read, at the end of Matthew 23, Jesus laments the world he sees around him in his day. To set the scene, he's in the Temple in Jerusalem and has just denounced the self-righteous, hypocritical religious leaders of the day. As he goes to leave he cries out, maybe loud enough for everybody in the vicinity to hear, “**How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.**”¹ The world Jesus was born into was a terrible mess. He aches to see the world, his world, set right, to see people in right relationship with God, with one another, with creation itself. As he recognizes how far the world has strayed from being right, he grieves for the world.

Well, the disciples overheard Jesus' lament. It's why they turn to him as they leave the Temple to point out just how impressive a structure it truly is. They were right. Some historians believe the Jerusalem Temple may have been the most impressive structure in the ancient world. It took hundreds of years just to construct. And when it was finished it became the theological center of Jewish life, dominant in the

¹ Matthew 23:37-38. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

imagination of every Jew of the day, the place where they all believed heaven overlapped with earth. All this means that the disciples are essentially saying to Jesus, “Come on, it’s not as bad as all that. Things aren’t perfect, but look at this place. It’s glorious! It will stand forever! How can you say that it’s desolate?”

But Jesus isn’t looking at the building; he’s looking at the hearts of the people who occupy it. And so he makes this earth-shattering statement: **“You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”** Imagine if somebody said to us that the White House, the Capitol Building, the Lincoln and Washington Memorials, all of it is going to be totally destroyed. The original Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are going to be burned to ashes. It’s a scenario that would be unimaginable for Americans. What Jesus was saying to these disciples was even more unimaginable. Literally, it was beyond their imagination.

But he wasn’t saying anything new. Time and time again the Old Testament itself declares that the things in this world that we like to believe are so impressive, so permanent, are anything but. Psalm 103 comes to mind. We read it this week as a church. Verses 15-16 stuck out to me:

**As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.**

Its place knows it no more. There will be a day when this place, this very spot on which I stand and everybody who will someday come to this spot, will have no idea who Jeff Chapman is. I will be long forgotten. Plus, there will come a day when this beautiful building will be gone and nobody will ever remember that it once stood here. The wind passes over everything, along with the rain, and rust, and time, and age, and eventually all the things we consider so permanent vanish like your warm breath vanishes on a cold winter morning. It’s there and then it’s gone. You have to live in denial to ignore this reality. It’s all coming down.

Well, when the disciples get a moment alone with Jesus later they naturally ask him, “When? Tell us, when will all this happen? Can you give us some signs so we can see it coming before it gets here?” His response, which takes up the rest of the chapter, falls into the category of apocalyptic. Don’t be intimidated by that word. The

word ‘apocalypse’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘revelation’, and originally referred literally to the pulling back of a curtain to reveal what was previously hidden behind it. In the Bible, apocalyptic texts like Revelation, Daniel, and sections like this in Jesus’ teaching, are meant to help the church see the present day in light of God’s ultimate purposes and plans, especially in light of the consummation of all things in the end times. With our eyes and ears we see and hear what we think is happening, but apocalyptic texts like this pull back the curtain to show us what is *really* happening. And by the way, when these texts are used to make predictions, they become dangerous. But when they are used to encourage, they become extraordinarily helpful. And so in spite of how it may seem so far, the ultimate message of this passage and this sermon is one of encouragement and hope. So stay with me.

Notice that Jesus never directly answers the disciples’ question. In fact, he doesn’t know when the end will come and even says so later in the chapter: **“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”**² But he does tell them plenty about what will happen in the meantime, and how they are to live until the end comes. I pray you will see that his words are as relevant in our day as in the day he first spoke them.

There are five things Jesus says the world can expect in the meantime, and five more things that Christians can expect.

First, the world can expect to see false prophets and false messiahs. There are going to be people who claim to speak for God, but who really don’t speak for God. Many will come invoking Jesus’ name, but they will not have anything to do with Jesus. Religious leaders will make any number of false claims. Political leaders will boldly declare themselves messiahs, though they won’t use that word. Many will claim that if they are put in power they will solve all the problems of a nation. Science will make similar claims, that one day technology or medicine will solve all the world’s problems, which is what a messiah does. In our culture materialism makes a similar claim. Mercedes-Benz tells us their cars are “Engineered to move the human spirit.” A beer company declares, “Heineken refreshes the parts other beers can’t reach.” Drive the right car and drink the right beer and your very soul will be satisfied. That’s what a messiah does. A lot of fake ones are going to show up on the scene.

Second, the world can expect wars and rumors of wars. Greed and pride and revenge and power will motivate one nation to violently attack another nation. Jesus

² Matthew 24:36

says this is just routine history. And even when war has not broken out, the threat of war, hostile nations waiting for the chance to act out their hostility, will always hang over us. Tell me a time in your lifetime when this has not been true.

Third, the world can expect nation to rise against nation. The Greek word for nation here is *ethnos*. This is racial division Jesus is talking about. People of one racial-ethnic group will be set against people of another racial-ethnic group.

Fourth, famines will strike. In those days, when economies were nearly entirely agricultural, famine spelled economic disaster. Jesus is saying that there will be seasons of great economic recession or depression all along the way, times when lots and lots of people simply don't have enough to even put food on the table for dinner every night.

Fifth, natural disasters will occur. Floods and earthquakes and droughts and fires, yes. But also pandemics. Forces of nature out of our control will bring great devastation in spite of our best efforts to shelter ourselves.

Just pause and take a look at that list for a second. This is what Jesus says the world should expect, not just in 33 A.D., but all along the way during this time between his resurrection and the end of days when he comes back. How relevant are his words today? And not just today. How about in 2001? Or 1945? Or 1929? Or 1865? I could go on and on. His words are perpetually relevant.

And these are just what the world can expect! Fasten your seatbelts because there are five more things that Jesus says Christians can also expect. (Stay with me! Trust me when I tell you that in the end this is a sermon about hope.)

First, Jesus says the church can expect persecution. People will hate Christians. Some will even be put to death. About 800,000 Christians, by the way, were killed over the last decade around our world.³ And though the threat of martyrdom is not real for most of us in the West, there is a growing animosity towards Christians in our culture. In profoundly secularized Europe, there is currently a deep hostility towards Christian teaching. Things are moving in that direction here, as anybody understands who has tried to represent Christ in the university classroom, or in entertainment and pop culture circles. William Temple,

former Archbishop of Canterbury, once stated, "Not all that the world hates is good Christianity; but it does hate good Christianity and always will." The person that doesn't believe this hasn't tried to live out the teachings of Christ in public view.

Second, the church can expect many followers to turn away from the faith. This is one of the most painful things I experience as a pastor, watching people you love and in whom you have invested, sometimes for years, walk away from the church and often from faith in Christ. At any point in time I could name people I know who are falling away.

Third, the church can expect to see division among its members. Christians will turn on one another over beliefs and practices. Some of these are people who were once friends, even family members.

Fourth, the church can expect to see false prophets rise up from *within* the church. These frauds will twist the teachings of scripture, or pick and choose only the parts they like, often for their own purposes or their own self-glory. Jesus says they will be effective in their deceit. They will lead many, many people astray. People are desperate to be led, desperate for teaching that sounds authoritative and tells them what they want to hear, so they will be easily misled. One commentator says, "False teachers are not only the first problem in the church but the central problem in the church."⁴

Fifth, the church can expect to see an increase in wickedness and a decrease in love. "**The love of many will grow cold,**" Jesus says.⁵ Not just a few. The love of *many Christians* will grow cold. In its place lawlessness will increase.

To stick with my boxer illustration, Jesus doesn't pull punches here. In fact, in verse 8 he acknowledges that all this will cause pain. But it's a specific kind of pain he's talking about: "**all this is but the beginning of birth pangs.**" I have not experienced birth pangs myself. I know many people who have. I've watched them a couple of times up close. It doesn't look or sound pleasant. But birth pangs are a very unique kind of pain, which only a mother knows best. Pain for the sake of pain is torture; nobody can endure it for long. But pain for the purpose of something good at the end can be endured, and often is. An expectant mother readily endures the pain of childbirth because she knows that in short order she will be holding her new son or daughter in her arms. Hope helps her endure.

³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march/christian-martyrs-numbers-down-by-half-in-decade-or-are-the.html>

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1990), 487.

⁵ See also 2nd Timothy 3:1-5

Don't miss Jesus' point. The pain of this age is not without purpose. We are not being tortured. These times are pregnant with expectation. Something is about to be born. Jesus names what that is in verse 14; it's the Kingdom of God that is coming. It's what every human soul aches for, this distant memory of Eden that is lodged deep in every human soul. Isn't this right? Every one of us longs for a life that flourishes. We want to live in peace, to know joy, to have place to belong, a family and a community. We long for justice, for things to be made right, not just out there but in here, in our own hearts that still revert back so often to fear, and selfishness, and pride. Everything that Jesus did and taught, ultimately his death and resurrection, points to this reality that God is birthing a new world out of the old one, putting everything back the way it is meant to be.

The problem, of course, is that so often even those of us who are trying to follow Jesus can't see it. In fact, at times it can seem that things are actually moving in the opposite direction. And that is exactly why Jesus not only tells us what to expect, he tells us here what to do in the meantime.

First, Jesus tells us that we must not be shaken. Verse 6: **"...see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet."** Some of you know that way back in March I had to be tested for COVID-19 because I'd been exposed and had symptoms. The nurse told me before she stuck the swab up my nose that it was going to be painful. I'm so glad she did. If she had not warned me, I'm afraid I would have thought she had just punctured my brain and that I was about to die. It's good to know what's coming.

Part of the reason Jesus tells us what is going to happen is so that we will not be surprised when it does happen. Jesus isn't surprised by what he sees going on in our world. He doesn't wake up one day in shock, "What is the world! I never saw this coming!" Neither should we be surprised, or anxious or afraid. God is still on the throne. He holds the world in his hands. Always has, always will. We must not be shaken.

Second, Jesus encourages us to stand firm. Verse 13: **"The one who endures to the end will be saved."** The word for "endure" is the Greek word *hupomenó*. It was once a military term used to describe a soldier who stood his ground against an attack. This isn't passive waiting, but active resistance. Just because the turmoil and injustice is expected, that doesn't just mean we

should give up and submit to it, or even run and hide from it. That's not what Jesus did. We are called to resist as best we can, to work for justice, and healing, and peace in our world, to seek the prosperity of our neighbors, and our city, and our nation, and our world. Every effort towards this end is not done in vain for a world that will ultimately be destroyed and forgotten, but for a world that is going to be renewed and restored. God is inviting us to participate in the setting right of his world!

The root word in *hupomenó*, by the way, is the word *meno*. You might remember that word. It's translated in the New Testament as 'abide' or 'remain'.⁶ It's the word Jesus uses over and over in John 15 when he tells us that we, as branches, must remain, in him the vine. In Revelation 2:10 Jesus promises, **"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."** In spite of all that is happening around us, we must make sure that we continue to make our home in Jesus, to rest in Jesus, to trust in Jesus. He will not fail us. Life is found in him. Salvation is found only in him.

Third, Jesus encourages us that we are also to bear witness to the Gospel. Verse 14: **"And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come."** We are to hang in there, yes, but we are to declare the good news of Jesus Christ while we do, both with our words and with our lives, and regardless of the cost of doing so. If you are Christian, this interim time between Jesus' resurrection and Jesus' second coming is for one thing, mission. That's it. Above all the church exists to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to a lost world, because if the church doesn't do this, who will?

Praise God because it's happening! In 1900 there were about 8 million Christians in Africa. Today there are somewhere between 600 and 700 million. The good news of the kingdom is indeed being proclaimed throughout the world. But there are 1.2 billion people in Africa, which means there are many who do not yet know the love of Christ. In our own corner of the world, we are surrounded by people who may have heard the Gospel but don't yet recognize it as the good news it truly is. The main job of our congregation, Faith Presbyterian Church, is not to worship and do classes and run programs and retreat. All that is important. But the main task is to go out in the world and declare good news and make disciples, and we must be faithful to this task.

⁶ I'm indebted to John Mark Comer for this insight in his recent sermon entitled, "Race & Justice: A Pastoral Word on our Cultural Moment" (Bridgetown Church, Portland, OR, June 21, 2020).

Finally, Jesus encourages us that above all we are to keep our eyes on him. The signs Jesus gives us here are not clues to help us read the tea leaves and figure out history. Again, that's not the purpose of revelation. We don't know when Jesus will return, so we need to expect his return every day. We should literally wake up every morning and pray for Jesus' return and then watch for it throughout the day, not passively but in active resistance to everything that stands against it. But ultimately, it's him we are watching for, not signs. In other words, our hope is in him alone. He alone is savior.

Lesslie Newbigin was a Presbyterian theologian and missionary to India who lived in the last century. At one point he predicted that as the West continued to become secularized, religion would not go away but would largely be replaced by politics. In other words, people would take all that deep-seated and innate desire to find purpose and justice and flourishing and a better tomorrow, and they would stop looking to Jesus for these things and start looking to their political party or candidate of choice for these things. The result, he predicted, would be chaos, a divide between the left and the right in the West that would come to look a lot like a religious holy war.⁷ Any of that sound familiar? You think he was on to something?

Brothers and sisters, I pray that you understand that a political leader or party is not going to save us. That's not where we place our ultimate hope. A vaccine is not going to save us and make all things right. Things weren't right before this pandemic. Technology may one day take us to the end of the known universe, but it will not save us.

This is not to say that we shouldn't be involved in politics, and medicine and science. Of course we should, doing our very best to represent Jesus and his Kingdom in every arena of society. But all along it must always be Jesus to whom we look for hope. We must not be shaken. We must stand firm and resist. We must bear witness to good news. And then ultimately we must look past everything else around us, so much of which Jesus told us was coming, and look to him alone because the Kingdom will never be possible without the King. But if we endure to the end, we will know both, both King and Kingdom.

By the way, somebody once asked Lesslie Newbigin whether he was an optimist or a pessimist. I love his answer: "I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist; Jesus

Christ has risen from the dead." In other words, there is an event that actually happened at one point in history which is ultimately going to consume all of human history. It's got nothing to do with optimism or pessimism, and everything to do with hope. Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. When you survey the events taking place across our nation and our world these days how do you feel? Afraid? Anxious? Angry? Hopeful? Apathetic? Energized?
2. Read the passage from Matthew 24:1-14. Pay attention to what stands out to you. What do you notice?
3. As you read the signs of the end of the age that Jesus gives here (5 for the world in vs. 4-8 and 5 for the church in vs. 9-12), do they seem to describe what you see going on right now in the world?
4. Jesus says in verse 8 that these are all just the beginning of 'birth pangs'. What do you think he means? What is being born?
5. Jesus tells us not to ever be alarmed when we see these things happening in the world. Do you find this possible to do? Do you find his teaching here to be an encouragement?
6. In verse 13 Jesus says, "**The one who endures to the end will be saved.**" Is this you?
7. Where is your hope these days? Honestly. What are you really hoping for when you see the mess in the world? Is it the return of Jesus or something else?
8. What are followers of Jesus to be doing during these days as we wait for Jesus to return?

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday: Exodus 34/Psalm 109

Tuesday: Exodus 35/Psalm 110

Wednesday: Exodus 36/Psalm 111

Thursday: Exodus 37/Psalm 112

Friday: Exodus 38/Psalm 113

Saturday: Exodus 39/Psalm 114

Sunday: Exodus 40/Psalm 115

⁷ Cited by John Mark Comer.