

Sermon 11.13.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Jeremiah 7:1-17 | **2 Thessalonians 3:6-13** | Matthew 6:25-34 | **Luke 21:5-19**

Does anyone remember Harold Camping? He's been dead for almost three years now, but he made the news quite a bit when he was alive, telling people that he had figured out when the world would end and Jesus would return. I don't know how he came up with this, but he first predicted that Judgment Day would occur on September 6, 1994. Now after that day came and went without the end of the world, Harold went back to the drawing board, tweaked his equations, and boldly declared that May 21, 2011 would be the actual end of the world, complete with months of fire and brimstone and plagues. You might have heard about this – his prediction was picked up on public radio, and he gained thousands of followers and millions of dollars. Of course, May 21 passed without any significant incident, although in Iceland the Grimsvotn Volcano erupted and some airplanes had to be re-routed. Nevertheless, Harold was undeterred. He doubled-down and said that the world would still be destroyed on October 21, 2011. For the record, it wasn't.

Harold Camping wasn't the first person to try to predict when the world would end. That Mayan calendar really through some people for a loop a few years ago. Remember Y2K? We had some canned goods ready in the basement. Throughout history, people have made all sorts of claims about the end of the world.

Especially Christians. As Christians we're waiting for Jesus to return and to fully usher in God's kingdom here on earth. We're waiting because Jesus promised he would return. And so throughout the ages people have been trying to figure out *when* it would happen. When the

world as we know it would end. But when his disciples asked, Jesus simply said, “About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

(Matthew 24:36) A lot of energy has been spent trying to figure out something that Jesus says we simply can't know.

Our readings this morning offer us some guidance as people still waiting for Jesus to return. They teach us *how to live* while we wait. How to live in the midst of fear and the unknown and the times when we feel like the world *as we know it* is coming to an end.

This has always been an important topic for our people. The very first Christians believed that Jesus was going to return imminently. They were *positive* that he would come back within their lifetimes, that it would literally happen any moment. And so they wondered how they should live as they waited for Jesus to come back. A bunch of Christians in the town of Thessalonica wrote to Paul, the person who had started their church, and they asked: *What should we do while we wait? How should we spend our time?*

Because there was some debate. Some people, believing that the world was going to end any moment now – they had stopped working, had given up their jobs, and were just sitting around. They disengaged from the world entirely. And in our reading this morning from the 2 Thessalonians, Paul told them that wasn't the right way to *wait* for Jesus to return. That wasn't the right way to greet the end of the world. He told them to get back to work. He wrote that famous line, “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10), and while some people have misused this line to advocate for certain social policies, it was originally written to keep Christians from withdrawing from this world.

You see, God loves this world. Eventually Jesus *will* return, and everything will change. God's kingdom will come and be fully established here on earth, and sin and evil and injustice will be destroyed. But knowing that Jesus will return, Paul says, is not a reason to be disengaged from this world. It's not cause for panic or fear or apathy. Instead, as we wait for Jesus to return, we are called to care for this world *more*, to love people *more*, to work for justice *more*, to share the Good News *more*. Love this world, he told them, and the people in it *more*. Even when it's hard. And as we wait, he said, "Do not be weary in doing what is right." (v. 13)

These are good words for us to hear this morning. "Do not be weary in doing what is right." The world did not end this week. Jesus has not yet returned. There is still wrong and evil in the world, and so we are still called to do what is right, to act justly and care for those in need, to lift our voices and use our hands as God's vessels of healing, reconciliation, and love.

We've all had experiences in life where even if we know the world isn't literally going to end, it feels like *our* world is ending, or at least the world we knew is being swept away. Maybe it was the loss of a child or loved one. Maybe it was the end of a marriage. Maybe it was violence or a friendship that dissolved or a hope that was dashed or a plan that fell apart or a tragedy that struck. Even when *the* world is not ending, it can feel like *our* world is ending, like what we know is gone, and that's a scary feeling.

It what Jesus described in our Gospel reading this morning. It sounds like he's talking about the end of the world in this passage, but he's not. He's talking about what was waiting in the near future for the first Christians. Within a few years, the Romans would come into Jerusalem and destroy the Temple, that holy and sacred place that was the center of Jewish religion and culture. It was traumatic for many Christians too, since most of the first Christians

had grown up in Jewish homes. Within their lifetimes, these first followers of Jesus would see violence and destruction, hate and fear. Many would be persecuted for their faith. Some of them would end up being betrayed by family and friends. Some of them were put to death.

And yet, the world went on.

And, in fact, Jesus told his followers that in the times when it felt like *their* world was ending, when it felt like they had lost their anchor, when they were scared or in danger, when there are fearful signs and events on earth, he told them not to be afraid, and he said, “This will give you an opportunity to testify.” (Luke 21:9, 13) This will give you an opportunity to testify. Do you hear his words? When the world is in chaos, when you are scared, when things are changing, when there is danger, *then*, Jesus says, *right then*, is the opportunity to testify to your faith in Jesus Christ. To live your faith. Your faith in a God who is bringing new life and hope and the kingdom even when you can’t see it.

So this morning let’s talk about the elephant in the room. And the donkey. We had an election this past week. Some of the people in our faith community supported a presidential candidate who won. Some of the people in our faith community supported a presidential candidate who lost. As your pastor, I love all of you, and together we don’t follow the elephant or the donkey, or anyone else who – as Jesus says – tells us they are our hope and that they know best. We follow the lamb, who takes away the sin of the world, and unites us as one.

It’s clear that our country is divided right now. I wish I knew how to make us less divided and how to love each other more, but I don’t. I know that we need to listen to one another better. I know that when we gloat or belittle or insult or demonize, then none of us win. And part of the problem is that we see politics as a game where someone wins and someone loses.

I'm concerned by what I've seen and heard in the last few days. In South Philly, swastikas were spray painted on windows, along with the words, "Heil Hitler." Close to my hometown, in a school that I just wanted to beat in soccer every year, black children were called 'cotton-pickers' and the n-word. The venom and hate on social media is so strong that even a millennial like me had to stop reading this week. On Wednesday night my cousin, who is gay, called me crying and scared because someone painted a racial slur on the side of her black neighbor's house and told them to 'go home.'

There is no doubt that some of these actions and words are the direct result of things said during the presidential race. I pray that our President and the President-elect both use their voices and power to condemn and speak out against these things. As followers of Jesus Christ, we know that such thinking and actions and words are sinful and wrong and have no place among us or our country or its leaders.

In the words of Jesus, this is an opportunity to testify.

In the words of Paul, it's a time to not grow weary in doing what is right.

In the words of Jeremiah, it's time to remember that we are called to act justly, to care for foreigners and widows and orphans and those who are innocent and vulnerable. Speak up.

Do not be afraid. Our hope is in Jesus, and it is *him* we follow. None of us know what the future holds, but we know that it is God who holds it. The world did not end this past week, because only God has that power. And it probably won't this week either, no matter what Harold Camping or CNN or your crazy uncle on Facebook tries to tell you. And we wait for Jesus, we continue to work for a better world and to pray for those who lead it and to testify to our

faith, trusting that Jesus has already given us the gift of eternal life that cannot be taken away, and that he will never leave us or forsake us.

And as we wait for Jesus, our call as God's people remains. We're called to love one another. We're called to be in community with one another. We're called to work for justice and peace and equality and the dignity of all. We're called to lift our voices and act together against racism and sexism and xenophobia and hate – and to resist the temptation to hate in response. We're called to have faith and to trust in God. So as you wait for Jesus, as you long for the kingdom, have hope. May you seize the opportunities to testify, to show forth your faith in Christ, through your words and through your actions. Dear friends, do not become weary in doing what is right. Amen.