

ADVENT 2020—SEARCHING FOR A SAVIOR
Welcome to the End Times
Isaiah 64:1-12 and Mark 13:24-27
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Three weeks ago— as I was pulling ideas together for our Advent sermon series—I read a blog post from my friend, Randy Saultz. With Randy’s permission I share a portion of what he wrote...

Far too often, people want pastors to open up the New Testament in fascinating and novel ways to make sense of the civil unrest, viral diseases, and natural disasters that surround us. (Unfortunately, too many preachers comply as if they are in on some secret code only they are able to interpret. As it turns out, this is a good way to sell books and gain internet followers). There is no other way to say it, we are fascinated with the end times.

The New Testament is a consensus report that the end times have begun. The end times are not waiting for us to do something more or waiting for history to check one more thing off the list. The end times are upon us.

This conversation is especially appropriate now as we approach the season of Advent and Christmas. The New Testament wants us to know the end times began while the world was going about its business of census and taxes. The end times began around the time a young teenager became miraculously pregnant and a baby was born in Bethlehem under Herod’s watch. By the time the Magi looked to the sky they were left with only one conclusion – something big was happening. As it turns out, it was the beginnings of the end of the old world.

So, as we approach the season when we celebrate the arrival of Jesus, we are reminded that it was a precursor of things to come. Perhaps our Christmas cards should say “Welcome to the End Times.”
Randy Saultz, “Scattered Thoughts” November 2020

I’ve titled our 2020 Advent series, “Searching for a Savior,” because it’s human nature to long for something or someone greater than ourselves who can deliver us from the messes in which we find ourselves. This year’s Advent Scriptures emphasize our longing for a Savior. Advent—the 4 weeks prior to Christmas—is a season of remembering and a season of longing. We look back and remember the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. And as we look back we celebrate the reality of Immanuel—God with us. During Advent we also look forward with longing—awaiting Jesus’ return for his Church. Jesus, the Messiah has come. Jesus, the Messiah is with us. Jesus the Messiah is coming. Welcome to the End Times!

2020 has been a challenging year for all of us, and when times are hard those of us who follow Jesus feel a longing stirred within us for the deliverance our Heavenly Father promises in Revelation chapter 21. *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”*

Revelation 21:3 & 4

Contrary to what some people think, longing for God’s deliverance isn’t a sign of weakness and it’s not succumbing to escapism; it’s evidence that God has designed us for more than just this life. In an Advent podcast I listened to this morning, Ruth Haley Barton pointed out that in addition to Jesus’ coming as a baby, and anticipating his coming for the Church, Advent points to a third coming—the longing to see God come and break into our immediate circumstances and deliver us. Who among us wouldn’t like to see that? As the Advent season begins, I want to encourage us to personalize our longing, our search for a Savior, by reflecting on these questions: ***“Where in your life are you most in need of God’s deliverance today?”*** ***“What do you desperately need a Savior to do for you?”*** I encourage you to keep those questions and your answers in mind as we walk through our service today, and as you do, remember Jesus is Immanuel—God with us.

Listen to these words of the prophet Isaiah from chapter 64, and as you listen to these words, embrace them as your cry for a savior...

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
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!
For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.

But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.

Yet you, LORD, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

In a similar vein, the Psalmist cries out with these words in Psalm 80. I'd like you to join me in reading this Psalm responsively. I'll begin and I'd like you to read the refrain, "*Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.*"

Psalm 80:1-7; 17-19

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.

**Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.**

How long, LORD God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.

**Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.**

Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.

**Restore us, LORD God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.**

“Restore us, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.” God’s face shining upon us speaks to his presence with us. When we know God is with us, we can endure almost anything. That’s the power of God becoming flesh; of Jesus, God’s Son, being born as a baby; that’s the power of Immanuel.

Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul from the Advent Epistles reading:

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

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

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul highlights the blessings we have in Christ—very fitting for us in this season of Thanksgiving, especially in the midst of a year when at times it has been difficult for us to remain focused on our blessings. In these verses we’re reminded of the grace we’ve been given in Christ; that we’ve been enriched in every way; that we don’t lack any spiritual gift; that He will keep us firm to the end so we’ll be blameless; and, that God is faithful.

The comment *“He will keep us firm to the end,”* reinforces the idea that the New Testament has a lot to say about the end times. But what exactly are the end times? There has been much speculation about the end times ever since the time of Jesus, but many of the ideas put forth as truth, fail to align with the truth of what Jesus and New Testament writers said.

One of the places Jesus spoke about the end times is in Mark's Gospel chapter 13—another of our Advent readings for today. It was toward the end of Jesus' ministry, not long before He was arrested and crucified. He and his disciples were leaving the temple and one of the disciples said, *"Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"* Jesus responded, *"Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."* Jesus' words were proven correct when what the Jews couldn't imagine happened in 70 AD—the Romans sacked their city and destroyed the temple. But Jesus had a larger purpose in mind than prophesying what would happen in the future. He wanted to redirect the focus of his disciples from temporal, earthly things to spiritual reality. And in verses 24-31 of Mark 13 Jesus said these words,

Mark 13:24-31

"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.'

"At that time 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.

"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. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

Ever since Jesus made those statements 2,000 years ago, hundreds if not thousands of people have boldly and confidently predicted when Jesus' words would come true...and they've all been wrong. I hope you're not disappointed, but I don't have any predictions for you today. The only statement I have is something that every one of you could deduce...Jesus' return for his Church is nearer today than it was yesterday. We know we're living in the end times—and have been since Jesus walked on the earth—but while we don't know when the end will come, Jesus does give instructions every one of us can and need to follow...

Mark 13:32-37

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. 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.

“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back— whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’

We don’t know when the end will come, but we’re called to be on guard; to be alert; and to keep watch. In other words, don’t fall into the trap of believing that what’s happening in this world is all that matters or matters most. Keep in mind that Jesus’ kingdom and his purposes are of supreme importance. And when we keep that in mind, it gives perspective to our present pain, hurt, fear and sense of loss.

I want us to return to the questions I asked you at the beginning of the sermon: ***“Where in your life are you most in need of God’s deliverance today?”*** ***“What do you desperately need a Savior to do for you?”*** And I want to encourage you that while you and I await Jesus’ second coming, Immanuel has come and He is working on our behalf. Listen to these powerful words from Romans chapter 8:

Romans 8:18-39 selected

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.