

Title: Better not Be Surprised When You See Jesus

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, give us the patience to alertly wait for the coming again of your son, Christ Jesus, to gloriously bring the world into your kingdom and through whom we pray. Amen.



Six months ago in Joplin, Missouri, a tornado wrought death and destruction. 161 people died. Around 900 buildings were destroyed. Still, thousands still attend state sponsored counseling sessions. Domestic violence is up 30%. Many are still homeless. Children continue to have nightmares.

Today there are many new buildings. Joplin is coming back to life. But for many, the rebuilding looks empty. Childhood schools are gone forever. Childhood haunts were wiped out. Some people who were in the Wal-Mart that day can't bring themselves to go into the brand new Wal-Mart.

The six month anniversary of the tornado is the same day we remembered John F. Kennedy's assassination. There was shock that someone would kill the President of the United States. Tornado shock still continues in Joplin.

That cataclysm must have felt like the end of the world six months ago. Only there were no clouds carrying a Son of Man in glory. Instead, the clouds were terrifying. It was only the survivors, with help, to pick up the pieces. Still, life goes on in Joplin. The lives of some of those who died have inspired survivors to live their lives better. They are more alert to life.

Last Tuesday, 161 trees were planted in Cunningham Park, one for each life lost that day. Each tree will be a symbol of renewal. Where there was death, new life will continue.

Nothing is permanent on this earth. But Jesus assures us that his words are eternal. Jesus' teachings continue indefinitely into a future we can only guess at. We can try to grasp at the things and stuff of this world, but it is all an illusion. Even the sun, moon, and stars don't matter. Our hope in this

Advent and every Advent is for Christ to come and make creation right. But we don't know when that will be. So we need to be alert.

Our gospel reading today is the end of what is called Mark's Apocalypse. It all began with the disciples admiring the beauty of the temple and Jesus telling them that the temple will soon be destroyed. Jesus rebuked them for seeing beauty in a building and not keeping their eye on the beauty of God's kingdom. Buildings come and go. God's kingdom will last forever.

Then they asked when all of this bad stuff will happen. Jesus gives them signs to look for. Our reading is the continuation of these signs.

Jesus previously outlined sufferings that would happen. Where we start is what happens after that suffering. It will be utterly dark. There will be no sun. There will be no moon. There will be no stars. These signs are similar to signs given by the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and Amos. It is hard to know here if Jesus is to be taken literally or metaphorically.

The powers in the heavens will be shaken. What on earth does this mean? Ladd says, "This language does not mean necessarily the complete break-up of the universe; we know from similar language elsewhere that it designates the judgment of God upon a fallen world that has shared the fate of (human) sin, that out of the ruins of judgment a new world may be born" (Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, p. 203).<sup>1</sup>

After this shaking of the heavens, the Son of Man will come in power and glory. Jesus is almost saying this word for word from the prophet Daniel. Jesus often refers to himself as the Son of Man. The phrase used by Daniel had become, by Jesus' time, an eschatological title, an end times title. Jesus' disciples would understand that Jesus is talking about the end times (if Jesus hadn't already scared them enough already).

At this point, Jesus is the hidden Son of Man. Jesus is the suffering servant. At the eschaton, everyone will know that Jesus is the Son of Man. With the

---

<sup>1</sup> Wessel, W. W. (1984). Mark. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (F. E. Gaebelin, Ed.) (750). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Son of Man established on the earth, he will send out angels to gather the world together.

Earlier Jesus cursed a fig tree on his way to the temple in Jerusalem. The fig tree was symbolic of Israel. Israel had not produced fruit so it is cursed to die. Jesus uses the fig tree to illustrate when the Son of Man will come. The fig tree is one of the few trees in the Holy Land that loses its leaves in the winter. So, just as the fig tree may be used to mark the seasons, the signs Jesus gives will mark the end times. But this can also be translated as the end coming without Jesus.

So, the disciple's generation will live to see all these things happen. If we translate what Jesus says as "it is near," then it is true that most of the disciples did see the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the year 70. Though some things are temporary, Jesus' words will last forever.

There are a lot of people today obsessed with the timing of the end of the world. Our Christian fundamentalist sisters and brothers are particularly obsessed with this. They believe the end is near. Since the end is near, there is no need to invest in the environment and society. It would be a waste of money. There is also no need to negotiate peace in the Holy Land, because the last battle before Jesus' return will happen there and it will happen soon.

I don't know if anyone else here listens to Science Friday on NPR, but last Friday they had the annual Ig Nobel Awards. They have ten categories. To qualify, a researcher must have done something that sounds funny, even though it is serious. Some scientists don't participate because they don't see the humor in their work. But many scientists travel at their own expense to Harvard from all over the world to receive their award. One of winning categories this year is for all the people who have predicted the end of the world since the 1950s. The last name was Harold Camping. None of the people listed were present to receive their award.

Here's the problem: Jesus says that no one will know when the end times come. Even the angels will not know. Not even the son will know. (Now this creates a theological problem in that the Father and the Son are supposed to be one and presumably have perfect knowledge one with the other. But Jesus seems to have sacrificed omniscience for taking human form.) But let us

assume that even Jesus is ignorant of the timing of the end. So, even knowing the signs that Jesus gives are useless in predicting the end times.

C. F. D. Moule says, “New Testament thought on the Last Things, at its deepest and best, always concentrates on what God has already done for (people) in Christ. It does not say how long will it be before the last whistle blows full-time? Rather it says Where ought I to be to receive the next pass? What really matters is that the kick-off has already taken place, the game is on and we have a captain to lead us on to victory. (C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* [London SCM], 1966], pp. 101–2)<sup>2</sup>

Jesus’ advice for us is simple. Stay alert.

To make the point easier to understand, Jesus gives us a parable. In the parable, a man leaves his servants in charge. They don’t know when the man will return. It could be any day and anytime during the day and night. And he better not come home and find a servant sleeping.

It’s like when I was at American Express and a VIP came from New York. We were told to look busy. Yet our fundamentalist brothers and sisters are not looking busy. They are doing very little to move Jesus’ agenda forward. They are more concerned about date setting.

For many of us, our issue during Advent is not sleeping it away, but rather when will we sleep. Our society is so caught up in preparing for Christmas that we forget the baby Jesus. So let us keep alert for incarnational moments during Advent – those times when we see Jesus in other people and other situations. That would be a worthy Advent activity. So, stay awake.

[Reuters contributed to the sermon.]

Text: **Mark 13:24–37** (NRSV)

<sup>24</sup> “But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,

---

SCM Student Christian Movement Press

<sup>2</sup> Wessel, W. W. (1984). Mark. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (F. E. Gaebelin, Ed.) (753). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

<sup>26</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>  
Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends  
of the earth to the ends of heaven.

<sup>28</sup> “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts  
forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things  
taking place, you know that he<sup>e</sup> is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this  
generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth  
will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup> “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the  
Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert;<sup>f</sup> for you do not know when the time will  
come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in  
charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>  
Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in  
the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep  
when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>e</sup> Or *it*

<sup>f</sup> Other ancient authorities add *and pray*

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 13:24–37). Nashville: Thomas Nelson  
Publishers.