

In the name of the Father and the ✠Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I sometimes wonder if the editors of the common lectionary haven't gone too far the other way, with the "cold water" of the future coming of Christ and the whole Eschaton discussion coming here at the start of Advent. What is the church trying to do, bum everyone out with all this talk of the end times, the judgment, and all that scary stuff? Oh, it takes the wind out of the happy-clappy Santa Claus and elves, but really, is it necessary to be *this* harsh?

Our sermon text this morning comes from the Gospel reading, verses 32 through 36. Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'"¹

With the exception of the famous 2000-year-old Man, that wonderful Mel Brooks character, not one person who heard Jesus speak these words is still alive today. What does this mean? Was Jesus simply wrong? Or, is Mel Brooks *really* the 2000-year-old Man? Or, are we part of a 2,000 year generation, rather than at 20 year one? Or, is there some other meaning to this text?

We certainly don't want to suggest that Jesus was wrong. After all, that would fly in the face of our theology and understanding of who Jesus is. The Son of God, indeed, God Incarnate, can't make a mistake. So then, one possibility is eliminated.

As funny as he is, Mel Brooks is just another mortal being, and the 2000-year-old Man was a schtick he and Carl Reiner created in 1961 after Mel had foot surgery.

¹ Luke 21:32-36 (NRSV)

We all know that Mel's not even close to 2000 years old, although some of his jokes might be. Check off possibility number two.

As to the age of this generation, one might make the case that this is exactly correct. After all, what is time in the context of God? A thousand years might be just a second, so we might be just two seconds into a generation in God's eyes. Perhaps we really are in the midst of that generation which shall not pass away until the return of Christ. However, to come to this conclusion would require us to enter into a land of speculation as to what is "time" in the concept of God, and I'm not certain that God really expects us to have to do that in order to believe in Him. Possibility number three is now eliminated.

So, then, we come to the real possibility that there is some other explanation of what we are experiencing in regard to Jesus' words to his disciples. Jesus has outlined a lot of terrible things, at least from a human perspective, that will come to pass before the Reign of Christ will commence. But even as these predictions and promises of conflict, war, and destruction are proclaimed, there is a word of promise shared with the disciples gathered around Jesus as well.

Jesus tells his disciples that even when heaven and earth pass, his words will remain. And again, some people will faint from fear, and the great powers will be shaken. But, and this is huge, when the Son of Man returns, those who follow him are to stand up and raise their heads, because, for those who follow Jesus Christ, *redemption is drawing near!* Even when it seems like the world is crashing around us, Jesus reminds us to keep our focus on what is important—that we, the baptized children of God, are assured of our redemption.

To help us be ready for that time when Christ comes again in power and glory to judge the living and the dead, as we confess in the creeds, Jesus reminds us to be on guard so that our hearts and minds will not be weighed down. He speaks of three things that can weigh down believers—dissipation, drunkenness, and worries of this life.

Dissipation, or better, the Greek word that is translated as dissipation, means “indulging in extravagant, intemperate, or dissolute pleasure.” Some suggest that it is a reference to the nausea that follows the overindulgence in alcohol, but it may well describe our own actions at the table, in stores, and elsewhere, especially in this holiday season from Thanksgiving through the new year. The English word *dissipation* can also be defined as “a process in which energy is used or lost without accomplishing useful work.” Now, *that* is a definition that describes a lot of the things that happen in and around our lives. In any case, dissipation is one of the challenges that face believers.

Drunkenness is also a problem, but not one that is a problem for everyone, to be sure. Note that Jesus doesn’t say that disciples should not partake in alcoholic beverages, but that we should avoid drunkenness, because it is one of the conditions which causes us to lose our focus on what is important, and can serve to distract us and lead us into a trap.

The third thing which Jesus calls us to guard against is the one that affects a whole bunch of us—and I’m afraid that it affects me a great deal. Jesus tells us that we should be on guard and take care that the worries of this life don’t weigh down our hearts. If our hearts are weighed down, it will be easy for us to be caught in a trap of unexpectedness when the time comes for the world to pass away.

My colleague from California, Pastor Brian Stoffregan, wrote these words about this particular section of the Gospel for today, “I have described my seminary experience as a time when all the false pillars upon which I had based my faith were destroyed, so that I was forced to rely solely on the Word and promises and grace of God. The “pillar-ectomies” were not always pleasant; but they were necessary for the growth and maturing and health of the true faith. Congregations may need to be reminded that the buildings that they hold so dear, are only temporary. There are more important topics for councils to concentrate on than the building.”

Brian is right on target here. There are many things which I considered to be the “Gospel truth” when I entered the seminary that had to be knocked down so that I might be open to what the Word of God really said, and how we Lutherans come to

understand the Word of God in our time and context. I had to overcome the belief that all Lutherans, or at least those who were planning to be Lutheran pastors, understood “God’s grace freely given and wholly undeserved” meant just that, and there was no need for any kind of special works or actions in order to receive that grace. I also had to overcome the idea that the church was the building in which many faithful persons gathered every Sunday morning and sung Bach chorales and heard twenty-five minute sermons. I also had to overcome the notion that the only way to do ministry was to do it through the big church and lots of structure.

But the most important thing that I had to learn was to set aside my own worries of this life. There was a time and a place to worry, but by and large, most of that which I—and perhaps you, too—worry about falls in the category of “no big deal” when compared to the issues that really face the world. To set aside worries of this life—where the next meal would be served, who would be the acolyte next week, why we keep running out of toilet paper—is one of the hardest things to do.

God has set out a plan for us, and the road map is fairly straightforward. Don’t get drunk with power, or the things that make up the secular world, or a consumer-driven secular lifestyle. Don’t waste energy on details that don’t move the kingdom of God forward. Don’t worry about the small stuff that makes up everyday life, because there is no way to get out of life alive.

Oops...that was a mistake. There is a way to “get out of life alive.” In our baptism, we are made children of God and coheirs with Christ to all that God has promised—including life everlasting. In the meantime, avoid the traps and be ready. We have time, even if we don’t think so. Amen.