

## WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

On May 19, 1780, General George Washington noted the following in his diary: “Heavy & uncommon kind of Clouds — dark & at the same time a bright and reddish kind of light intermixed with them — brightning and darkning alternately. This continued till afternoon when the sun began to appear. The Wind in the Morning was Easterly. After that it got to the Westward.” According to various reports from across New England, by 12 noon, the sky was as black as midnight. The rain smelled of soot and a black scum floated on the rivers.

Chickens went to roost, cattle returned to the barns, night birds sang, and frogs croaked. People panicked. Children were sent home from school. People left work and gathered in taverns and churches. Rev. Nathaniel Whitaker in Salem, Massachusetts declared the Dark Day “was a rebuke from the Almighty for the sins of the congregation.” One hundred years later, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem about the Dark Day:

*‘T was on a May-day of the far old year  
Seventeen hundred eighty, that there fell  
Over the bloom and sweet life of the Spring,  
Over the fresh earth and the heaven of noon,  
A horror of great darkness, like the night  
In day of which the Norland sagas tell, —  
The Twilight of the Gods.*

Although people did not know why it got so dark in the middle of the day, many were convinced the end of the world was upon them and that Christ was returning in judgment. In Connecticut, some state legislators moved to adjourn so they could go to their homes and be with their families. A representative named Abraham Davenport stood up and declared, “I am against adjournment. The day of judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought.”

Even at the time, some people suspected natural causes for the Dark Day. Modern scientists have concluded that massive wildfires in Canada combined with wind patterns and weather systems to blanket New England with thick smoke on the Dark Day of 1780.<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if George Washington or Rev. Whitaker or any of the Connecticut legislators were thinking about Mark 13:24-27 on that Dark Day in May 1780:

*But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.  
Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds'  
with great power and glory.  
Then he will send out the angels,  
and gather his elect from the four ends of the earth  
to the ends of heaven.*

Mark 13 certainly sounds a lot like Revelation, doesn't it? That's no surprise. Both are examples of what is called "apocalyptic literature." "Apocalypse" means "Revelation." Literally, it means "to pull back the curtain" to reveal something. And what do we see? God's glory and power and might and the fulfillment of God's cosmic purposes for all of creation. As strange as it may sound considering all of the scary language, apocalyptic literature was written to provide hope for God's people as they went through difficult and challenging times. Contrary to many interpretations of Revelation and other apocalyptic literature, God's power and promise don't help us escape *from* the challenges of life, but see us *through* the challenges of life, and call us to be faithful witnesses come what may in this life.

When Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Jesus in private, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (Mark 13:4) they weren't much different from people throughout the last 2,000 years who have wondered about the "end times." History is full of stories about people who claimed to know the exact date of the return of Christ and the end of the world. Other people have interpreted the news of the day and assigned biblical meanings to wars and earthquakes and famines. This is a regular occurrence, despite the fact that Jesus himself very plainly tells his disciples, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32)

Instead of giving Peter, James, John, and Andrew an exact timetable of the future, Jesus talks in terms of being faithful in the present. Beware! he says. Watch out! Look out! Be careful! Remember, Mark was writing to a community of believers who were going through some of the very things Jesus describes — and it wouldn't be long before the temple and all of Jerusalem itself would be destroyed by the Romans. How do you keep the faith when your world is crumbling around you? How do you faithfully serve God when current events — personal, national, and global — suggest that God really isn't in charge?

In other words, what do you expect? What you believe about the future will shape how you live in the present. If you believe the future holds no hope (both in this life and after you die), then you're likely to grab for everything you can right now. But if you be-

lieve the future holds hope (both in this life and after you die), then you'll strive to live your life in light of God's promises and God's claim upon your life. In his commentary on this section of Mark, Lamar Williamson, Jr. writes, "Mark 13 speaks to those who expect too much and to those who expect too little. It is especially pertinent for those who have forgotten to expect anything."<sup>2</sup> Those who expect too much will fixate on predicting the exact date of Christ's return. Those who expect too little will be like the scoffers near the end of the first century A.D. who said, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" (2 Peter 3:4)

But what about the times when we forget to expect anything? Maybe it's the day-in-day-out, humdrum rhythm of life. Maybe it's the fact that 2,000 years have gone by since Jesus promised to return. Maybe it's the daily news headlines on your Smart Phone or tablet. Maybe it's some personal difficulty that weighs heavy on your heart and mind. What do you expect?

In the January/February 1999 issue of *Presbyterians Today*, Bible professor W. Eugene March published an article entitled, "The End of the World." You may remember the doomsday predictions throughout 1999 as we approached 2000 — Y2K and the end of life as we know it. People were making plans to gather in the Holy Land for New Year's 2000 and wait for the return of Christ. In his article, Dr. March laid out "what Presbyterians believe about the end of the world." He said, "Fundamental to Presbyterian beliefs is a rejection of idle speculation about the 'end times.' No one but God can know the time and way. Therefore, certainty that God's purposes will one day be brought to completion is sufficient for Presbyterians. Rather than being anxious and pessimistic, God's people trust hopefully and live joyfully because in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has revealed the divine purpose of well-being for all." He also notes, "To those trying to work out a timetable [for Christ's return], 'Only God knows, but God has given us important work to do in the meantime.'" Dr. March's final sentence is a message that was relevant to first century Christians in Mark's community of faith and is relevant to twenty-first century Christians who sometimes wonder what to expect: "And God's charge remains: confidently hope and watchfully work until the Lord returns."<sup>3</sup>

Remember Abraham Davenport, the Connecticut state legislator who called for candles to be brought into the chamber so they could continue their work? Here's how John Greenleaf Whittier described him in his poem about that Dark Day:

*And there he stands in memory to this day,  
Erect, self-poised, a rugged face, half seen  
Against the background of unnatural dark,  
A witness to the ages as they pass,  
That simple duty hath no place for fear.*<sup>4</sup>

"Simple duty hath no place for fear." That would be a good heading for the parable Jesus tells his disciples at the end of today's gospel reading from Mark. "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." Then Jesus tells a story

about a man who gives each of his servants work to do while he is away on his trip, with special instructions to the doorkeeper “to be on the watch.” (Mark 13:34-36) It has been suggested that this story is a good allegory of life in Mark’s community and even for us as the church today: In Jesus’ physical absence, all of us as his servants receive his power to do the tasks we are called and expected to do. And we are assured that he is never far away and will one day return.

In the meantime, we have work to do. At the end of Matthew’s gospel, the risen Lord tells his disciples, “Go, make disciples, teach, baptize.” At the end of Mark: “Go to Galilee . . . Go into all the world.” At the end of John: “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” In the beginning of Acts, the risen Lord tells his disciples, “You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.” And as the disciples were gazing up into heaven, two men said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11) In other words, quit standing around — you’ve got work to do! At the end of his magnificent chapter on the meaning of the resurrection from the dead, most of which is written in “not yet/still to come” language, the apostle Paul brings it back to the present when he tells the Corinthian believers, “Therefore [because of everything I just got through telling you about the resurrection], my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)

It is said that when the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther was asked, “What would you do if you knew the world was going to end tomorrow?” he replied, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” Of all people who have ever served the Lord, Luther can’t be accused of being naive about the challenges that life brings, even and especially as a result of being faithful to Jesus Christ. I think Luther’s plan to plant his apple tree is akin to Representative Davenport’s call to bring candles into the darkened legislature room so they could continue doing what they were called to do.

In the midst of the vivid, maybe even scary apocalyptic language of Mark 13, we hear a word of hope in God’s promises and a clarion call to a present life of faithfulness based on that hope in God’s future. Following the merger of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches in 1983 to form our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the church adopted a “Brief Statement of Faith” to say, “This is who we are. This is what we believe. This is how we intend to live as followers of Jesus Christ.” I have great appreciation for the affirmation at the end of that faith statement. It clearly conveys the message of “confidently hoping and watchfully working until the Lord returns.”

*In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth,  
praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!”*

*With believers in every time and place,  
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death  
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.*<sup>5</sup>

***Let us pray: Lord, keep us alert to your coming, faithful in our present service, persistent in prayer, always expecting great things as we love and serve you and your people. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>CONNECTICUT The New England Dark Day, May 19, 1780  
<https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/>

<sup>2</sup>Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 243.

<sup>3</sup>W. Eugene March, “The End of the World,” at [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org).

<sup>4</sup>CONNECTICUT The New England Dark Day.

<sup>5</sup>“A Brief Statement of Faith,” *Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), p. 312.