

Mark 13:14-23
St. John's Norwood
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The October light has faded and November's cold has settled in. It is a fitting season to read today's passage. We hear Jesus say... *"the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat..... Pray that it may not be winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be."* and a chill goes through us, both for the message it sends and the resonance it holds for us in this darkening time of the year. And when Jesus warns us about false messiahs and false prophets that will lead us astray with signs and omens, we shiver.

We hear Jesus' predictions and most of us pull the cloak of our lives around us more tightly and quickly turn our thoughts to plans for coming celebrations of Thanksgiving and Christmas. Here we are entering the Holiday Season and as bright, hardworking, practical people, we are not interested in wasting our days worrying about some mythological end times that, according to Mark, Jesus predicted.

Well, if we might, just for a moment, resist the urge to shake off the chill and stay with the text, we might see that in fact Jesus is urging the disciples not to waste their time worrying either. In the first section of this chapter, the disciples hear Jesus predict the destruction of the temple and they badger Jesus to tell them what they should look for to alert them as to when this will happen. *"Tell us, when this will be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"* Jesus responds by enumerating all the calamities and wars that are to come before the end time and concludes by saying these events mark only the beginning, the birth pangs. But he says absolutely nothing about signs or timetables.

When we get to today's passage, Jesus does the same thing. He describes in chilling detail the events leading up to the end times but he says nothing about a timeframe. Taking both of these sections of Mark together, it seems clear that Jesus point is that his disciples are not to waste time worrying about what hasn't happened. On the contrary, Jesus commands them to use their present time well. *"False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect." Be alert; I have already told you everything.* In other words, Jesus urges them to take care to discern what truly is of God...and then he charges them to go out to spread the good news ...the good news of God's boundless love for all creation.

We all have some idea of what Jesus' command meant to the disciples back then...we know that they were about to witness both Jesus' death and resurrection...we

know that they would establish the church and that many of them would be persecuted and die in Christ's name. But what how do we answer Jesus command today?

I want to suggest that the good news of the gospel is most powerfully communicated in the unfolding story of our lives as we live them in attention and love. When we are willing to risk stepping into the mystery of who we are and are willing to acknowledge and embrace the dark and the light and the shadows in between, we are living in attention and love. When we struggle in our lives to give expression to the truth of whom God created us to be, we are living in attention and love. And when we understand that the homeless, the hungry, the widow, the orphan and the person in the opposing political party do not exist in a separate universe but are our neighbors... and if the neighborhood survives, we survive together and if the neighborhood doesn't survive, we will die together...we are living in attention and love.

I first heard that expression "in attention and love" in the writings of theologian Belden Lane and when I read today's passage from Mark, it surfaced in me like light. Because I think this is precisely what Jesus is saying to the disciples... and to us. We are called to discern...to be attentive to... the difference between the passion of God and the passion of the world... we are called to try to discern what voices, what impulses, what urgings in us have to do with worldly values and which ones belong to Godand then we are called to love deeply and widely as God loves us. Jesus is calling the disciples... and us... to offer God our undivided heart.

Discernment of the things of the world tends to be rooted in power...discernment of the things of God is rooted in love. We read in Hebrews today, "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*" Yes it is. It is a fearful thing... for those of us who value competency and accomplishment...for those of us who want to be in control of our lives... who want the signs and symbols of success to identify us to the world...to be in the hands of the living God. It means we have to acknowledge, as Harrison pointed out last week, that all that we have belongs to God....It means giving up our agenda and giving over control of our lives to God....it means becoming disciples charged to live in attention and love.

Recently, I heard a wonderful story about discernment. A friend confessed that years ago when he was a vestry member at his church, he was asked by the then Rector to head the stewardship drive for that year. He hummed and hawed and wanted to refuse saying he didn't feel it was his calling to raise money. He had other gifts. All the signs were there. He was doing well in his business, his family was thriving and he had just moved into a new home. The Rector, however, twisted his arm, and so he and another member of his church agreed to do the job. My friend said he hated asking people to pledge, broke out in a cold sweat when he had to make calls and generally felt as if he was brow beating parishioners when he asked them for money. At the end of the campaign, although the amount raised was far more than had ever been raised before in that church, my friend was incredibly disappointed in himself. He had failed, he thought, because he didn't reach his goal.

And then, one day as he replayed over and over what he could have done differently, it struck him. The goal for the stewardship campaign was not God's goal. It was his goal. It was a false goal.

And the signs that he was doing well in his career and his life were not necessarily God's signs, they were his signs...the world's signs...they were, false signs of a calling from God. And he began to wonder about his gifts...and slowly over the course of that year, through prayer and patience, he discerned that whether he liked it or not, he had been called to that leadership position...it wasn't a matter of his believing he was good at it or that he did or didn't like raising money...he understood finally that it was a matter of answering God's call to spread the good news of God's love.

And once he had discerned that God had called him, it changed everything. He was able to ask parishioners for money with compassion and love. Since that time, he has headed many stewardship campaigns and other fund raisers and he says now that he actually gets excited to think he is serving God...He says "stewardship is not about goals but about God." As his life story has unfolded, he is living it in attention and love.

So are we simply to disregard Jesus' chilling predictions about the end times? I don't think so....because if we disregard them, we also have to disregard the good news that Jesus brings us in this same passage... Do you remember "*but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days.*" Now we Episcopalians get very nervous when we hear words like "elect". So who are the elect and why should "the elect" have to endure the end times anyway. We read that a few lines later...And these are among the most important lines you will ever read...so listen carefully.... "*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 winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*" (Mark 13:26-27) Do you hear that? We all of us, all of humankind, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven, are the elect.

Where is God stirring in each one of us just now? Are we willing to take the time to contemplate and to discern the life of God in us and celebrate that? It just may be that the only mark we make in this world that really matters will come out of the work of God's love that we carve into the lives around us.