

Calvary United Methodist Church  
December 2, 2018

## THE GREATEST CHALLENGE WE FACE

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### Children's Message:

Luke 21:25-36

Well, if our kids would come forward, I love spending time with our kids, so come on up. You look Christmassy. (Thanks!) (She looks just like a mini Mrs. Claus.) A mini Mrs. Claus. (Yeah.) Ok. You have the best smile of the day. You all smile, let me see. You have pretty good smiles. I'm impressed!

Okay, it's official. We are in the Christmas season. Have you seen any signs of that? (Christmas trees being put up. Bunches of Christmas lights. Holly. Mistletoe.) Did your dad go and hang off a ladder and put Christmas lights around your house? (Yeah.) (Well, we did that after Thanksgiving.) (My Elf on the Shelf came back.) Oh. (Mine, too.) How many already have your Christmas tree up? (We put lights around it and today we made a chain at Sunday School and then today after church we are going to hang it up.) Oh, boy, that's nice. How about you guys? You have your hand up. (Yeah, and we have two Christmas trees.) Two! (Children speak.) Let me ask you, do you have a Christmas wish list? What do you want for Christmas? (I want...books.) Books? (A 3-D printer.) A 3-D printer. Good luck! How about socks and underwear. (Child speaks.) Oh, a custom Eagles jersey. And what do you want? (Child speaks.) Oh, and how about you? (Child speaks.) I'm a little out of touch with toys, but I'll take your word for it. (Legos.) Legos. (A West Virginia jersey.) A West Virginia jersey...God bless you. I have friends in West Virginia who would just weep at that – your devotion. (A turtle.) A turtle. A baby doll. How about you? (Child speaks.) So many things, right? Hold the thought. I'll get right back to you. (Um, I want, um...) Think hard. (A new drum set.) A new drum set...God bless your parents. (A Steelers Jersey.) A Steelers jersey. Did you figure it out? (Child speaks.) That would be good.

Well, let me ask you a question here: what if Jesus never came? What if there was no Christmas? What would the world look like? What do you think? What would it look like? (It would be the same except not all the Christmas gifts.) I don't think so. I think it would be very dark. There would be no Easter. There would be no Christmas. No Halloween. No St. Patrick's Day. (It would be black everywhere.) It wouldn't be black, but you know what? There probably wouldn't be public education because only wealthy people went to school back then. So, you wouldn't go to school. Your father would give you a hoe and you would have to hoe your garden and it would be a big garden, right? And you know people wouldn't be really nice because they didn't learn the Golden Rule. Do you remember the Golden Rule? (Treat others the way you want to be treated.) Very good. Well, if you didn't have that rule people wouldn't do that. They would just walk all over you.

You know what? There wouldn't be science the way we know it, or medicine or education or art or music. Do you know that Christians sing? (No elves.) No elves, absolutely! You are correct. There would be druids, but no elves. (There wouldn't be a Christmas countdown.) No Christmas countdown. (And no one could make any toys.) That's right. They wouldn't give you anything. (And Santa could bring the toys.) There wouldn't even be a Santa, right?

Well, do you know that when Jesus was born the angels sang and ever since Christian people have been singing. Do you have a favorite Christmas carol? (Deck the Halls.) Deck the Halls. (And there would also be no North Pole.) (Twelve Days of Christmas.) Twelve Days of Christmas. (We Wish You a Merry Christmas.) We Wish You a Merry Christmas. (Jingle Bells.) Jingle Bells. (Joy to the World.) Joy to the World. (Child speaks.) All of them? Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer. (I like Noel.) Noel. (There would be no North Pole.) That's right, well, kind of, yes. (Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer.) Rudolph, and he had a very shiny nose, didn't he? (Mary, Did You Know.) Mary, Did You Know. (Child speaks.) Jingle Bell Rock. Alright! (Let It Snow.) Let It Snow, ok. (What if there was no Rudolph, then Santa wouldn't be a guide and there wouldn't be a Santa to drive the sleigh.) That's right, wouldn't even need it. Yeah, the world would be a very dark place; there wouldn't be very much fun.

But Jesus was born. And there weren't big signs like big neon signs like: Baby Her, Manger, nothing like that. It came very quietly. (And all the trees would be dead.) All the trees would be dead...well, there wouldn't be any Christmas trees. (Child speaks.) No presents, yeah.

This is going to be the sermon, by the way, so we'll be good. Well, let me bring this to a close. This is the first Sunday of Advent and we light a candle to remind ourselves that with Jesus, light came into the world. And with that light came hope. And with that hope came all the things that you love so much about Christmas, because it is about the Christ child.

So, I'm going to pray and then I'll ask my able assistant, Wesley, to help us, alright? And then I'm going to select someone to light the first candle of Advent. I got that one covered, so let's pray: Thank you, Lord, for coming to our dark world and bringing light and joy and hope especially for these children. And bless them this Christmas. Help us remember that the light is not all through the world yet, so help us to share that light in Christ. Amen.

Okay, you can see Wesley for your fruit snacks and if I am not mistaken, Christen, this is your first Christmas here, right? First she is going to get a fruit snack and then bring her up. Ok, bring your sister up here.

### **Message:**

Would you join me in a word of prayer? Loving God, help us today to hear from you amidst the cares and the anxieties of this world and of our lives. Remind us that you are at work in us. Guide us. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in

your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In this passage, Jesus is sitting very calmly on the Mount of Olives. I would imagine the sun is sort of setting in the west. Across the valley stood the grand and glorious temple. It was not so much a tribute to the glory of God to Herod as a great monument, but it was a jewel and the people throughout the Middle East and even as far as Rome would marvel at it. It was one of the wonders of the world. I can imagine if it was twilight, Jesus could see the glow of the fires from the altar as he looked down upon it from the Mount of Olives, the altar of burnt offerings. He could see various priests preparing for the evening offerings; throngs of people down below in the courtyard of the women and the gentiles praying; Rabbis and teachers on the steps around the temple would be offering commentary on the Torah, teaching people about it; vendors and money changers were concluding business of the day as they would and tomorrow the sun would rise and it would be business as usual. And Jesus is taking all of this in, but he's also seeing the future. It wouldn't be very long before he would hang on a cross outside the city gate, but in the calm of the moment what Jesus foresaw was tragedy ahead. And the events that he saw happened beyond the ability of his disciples to control. It would be as though the stars fell from the heavens and the sun would hide its face and the scene before him would be one of destruction and havoc and death.

Now, this got the attention of his band of followers, certainly, which through them into a mixture of disbelief and fear and yet Jesus was very serene about it. It was odd. Despite knowing what lie ahead for him and the terror it would bring to his disciples, despite the predictions of devastation that would befall the temple, the city, the nation, Jesus simply had this calmness because he trusted that God was with him no matter what happens.

Now, he was taking his disciples someplace...where is he taking us? Well, the real question behind this discourse is not when does the world end, rather how does one persevere in times of distress and remain faithful. That's the real question this text is asking. Now, Jesus understands what it means to be a victim. He understands people who are victimized. He understands the plight of people in a way that is probably beyond our understanding. He would be unjustly arrested, beaten, tortured, prejudicially sentenced, executed in one of the most horrid, humiliating ways anyone could think of and through it all, you see that he never gave up his trust. It wasn't like: hey, I got a lock on this, three days after will be pretty good. That was completely unclear to him. All he knew was that he had to trust God that good would come out of this. And he never gave in the temptation to answer those who betrayed him, framed him, tortured and executed him with hate or venom or bitterness. And despite suffering in a way that would just completely overwhelm anyone, he committed his fate to God.

And Jesus never gave in to fear. Now, fear is the biggest challenge the disciples faced and you could see to a man they'd all cut and run. They gave into their fear even Peter, the Rock. Fear overtook all faith, displaced all loyalty. It rendered them incapable of any kind of trust.

So, their fear was their greatest challenge, but fear is the greatest challenge that we face too.

And that is very true. Now, people make a lot of money peddling fear. Whole industries arise using the levers of fear to sell their project. Let me ask, don't raise your hand, how many of you have anti-wrinkle cream? I mean, if you have wrinkles, oh my gosh! What about those products of keep your hair on your head? I think it's too late. I'm not worried about it now. I'm just going to get used to looking like my grandfather. It's okay.

Media mainlines fear for profit because on any given day, newspapers, media, radio, television, websites, they carry stories that would make you hide in fear in your closet if you let them do that, and lest we forget what lobbyists and not all but some politicians do. They are experts in conveying fear...the more fearful you are the more likely you will vote for whatever it is that they promise because that will soothe your fear. And people think that's great.

Now, fear is a pretty complex emotion. I spent a little bit of time working on those kinds of things this week. There's two main kinds of fear. There's anticipatory fear. That's when you perceive a threat that you know what to do about it. You take evasive action. You are driving down the road, it's a slippery day, you see someone pass you going very very fast and you realize that this person is probably going to get out of control. You back up a little bit or back off the gas and you just wait and you watch. Sure enough he's in a ditch. Okay. Or you see some dangerous situation that threatens you. You kind of anticipate that, you adjust yourself to that and you begin to take deliberate action to do what you have to do. Anticipatory fear.

But then, there's inhibitory fear. That is when the treat is too vague or too appalling for us to know how to deal with it. So, we deny it. We deny that there is a problem there, because we don't know what to do and because there is no way to discharge the fear through action because you paralyzed yourself, then you are inhibited rather than energized. So, the term paralyzed by fear describes inhibitory fear at work.

Because when we are afraid, what happens is you breathe very fast, you lose focus, you become nervous about everything. You can't do simple tasks with the speed and rapidity that is needed, that you would do every day anyway. You can't quite get a handle on what is going on or what is going to happen next or what should happen next and this is a pretty apt description of what happened to the disciples following Jesus' arrest. They just shut down. They went in the Upper Room to hide themselves hoping they would not be next. As a strategy, it wasn't great strategy. It worked out for them because Jesus was in charge, but it wasn't a good strategy.

Now, you know what? In our time there's a similar dynamic in play in fear. There are some very real things to be aware of. There is a need to have the kind of anticipatory fear that makes you go into action and there are crazy people out there. There are dictators, terrorists, individuals who are unhinged and very dangerous. That's really true. There is nothing untrue about that. But it's the inhibitory fears that do us in because they just make us stop and we lose focus. We forget what to do and we even forget to breathe. In fearful situations actually the best thing you can do is breathe and breathe deep and collect your mind very quickly and don't shut

down.

So, in these times, when people are peddling fear, we know that, yes, everything is changing. It really is. It is changing. But in those changes there is the seeds of hope and that is what you want to look for. There is always some seed of opportunity in this and that's where the text begins to speak to us.

Now, I know that when Jesus said, "When you see these things, the Kingdom of God is near." He went on to say that the disciples would see the Son of Man coming in clouds and great glory. We know that some 35 or so years after Jesus' execution and resurrection the Roman armies came in, they destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed the whole country's infrastructure. Israel ceased to be a nation at that time around 69-70 CE or AD whichever one you want to use. And they were not a nation until the year 1948. So, the vision that Jesus had did come true. He foresaw it. So, did Jesus return back then? Did his disciples see him coming in the cloud and the fullness of the kingdom arriving? Well, the answer is no, that didn't happen back then. But the seeds of God's kingdom sown in the bloody ground of the cross sprouted and what you saw was a new community that arose and new ways to be human, not ways based on selfishness, violence, greed and war, but ways of compassion and of grace and of treating people the way that God has treated us, of bringing that kind of peace. And when I use the word "love" I don't use it unadvisedly, but to love and to respect others for who they are. That was introduced into the world. And we saw the signs of the kingdom: "Lift up your head, you'll see the kingdom," Jesus said, "Your redemption will draw near."

So, how do we persevere in times of chaos and fear? Well, I think it really does help to know the difference between anticipatory fear and inhibitory fear, to not deny what is going on but to calmly collect yourself and deliberately know what you are supposed to do. You don't let fear paralyze you, especially when you are paralyzed by the unknown.

Second, remember there may be chaos, but it will come to an end, so you stay faithful.

The third thing is that you stay focused on Jesus and in touch with him because he is with you. He is closer to you than the beating of your heart and we remember that Jesus's way will be victorious over all powers in this world. To put it more simply, if you read the back of the book, we win. It's good.

So, the greatest challenge that we face actually is our fears and often we are not even sure what kind of fear is out there, it's just fear. So that's when we let it paralyze us. And instead what we do is we look to Jesus, find our center in him. He is our guide. He is the one that we can trust and we stay faithful in hope.

Now, today we lit the first candle of Advent. We didn't do that to hide behind a cocoon of sentimentality or kind of participate in the Christmas machine. Instead we light it because we are the light in the midst of the darkness and we are called to see the world as God sees it and there

is both beauty there and there is terror in there too. There is evil, but there is good and with heads lifted up and clear-eyed hope we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled even as we put our hands to work as the very hands of Jesus. And so in lighting this candle, we rejoice in His presence, we walk in His light even if the light we have is just for one faithful step at a time, this is how we persevere. This is how we witness to Jesus in the dark time. By faith, we hope. And when you have hope, you can persevere. Amen.