

November 14, 2021 – Daniel 12:1-3 & Mark 13:1-13

As I was looking at our lessons for today, I had a bit of nostalgia. Because the first sermon I ever wrote and preached just happened to be based on our Gospel lesson. All the way back in 2006.

Of course, I didn't actually preach it in a church. I was only a second year seminarian at the time. I wasn't allowed to set foot in a real pulpit. Instead, I preached it to my fellow students in a classroom.

And it was funny. Because our professor had once told us that one of things he couldn't teach us was how to have energy and enthusiasm in our preaching. We either had it or we didn't. And so with that in mind, I stepped into the fake pulpit determined to prove to him that I had that energy and enthusiasm.

Surrounded by classmates, I began preaching on Mark 13. About natural disasters and poverty and wars and rumors of wars and persecution and tribulation. But the one who endures to the end will be saved!

And when it was all over, our professor stood up and turned to the class and asked what they thought of my sermon. And nobody said much of anything. Until finally Jake Scott, an Army captain with three combat tours under his belt, put his hand up and sheepishly said, “It was a little... frightening.”

We went on to have a nice little conversation about keeping the volume of your preaching in proportion to the room you're in. And that what I was doing might have worked for a 500 seat cathedral, but it was little much for a 20 seat classroom.

After I graduated from seminary and arrived at my first call, I pulled that sermon back out. And I realized that I could preach it again. I toned it down a few notches. But it was all basically the same content. Natural disasters. Poverty. Wars. Rumors of wars. Persecution. Tribulation. It wasn't 2006 anymore. It was 2009. But it was just as true. I only needed to swap in a few new examples.

And actually, I could have preached that sermon again this morning. Because even 15 years later, we still have natural disasters and poverty and wars and rumors of wars and persecution and tribulation. The examples have changed. But the same pain and suffering still plagues us all.

The harsh reality is that even 2000 years ago when Jesus was talking about all this, it was nothing new. Look at our Old Testament lesson. Take a look at what it says about the last days: *“And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.”* Sorry, but that's not a prophecy that things will get better. That's a prophecy that things will get worse.

But that shouldn't surprise us. It often does, largely because of the world's influence on us. It's called humanism. And humanism says that the world is gradually getting better and better. Through things like science and technology and art and culture and history and philosophy. That humanity is gradually shaping the world into a better and better place.

If you've ever watched Star Trek, with its ideal future and perfect Federation of Planets, without greed or corruption, that's humanism. In fact, Gene Roddenberry, who created Star Trek, received multiple awards from the American Humanist Society. If we just work hard to be the best that humanity can be, boldly go where no man has gone before, then everything will get better.

Except it won't. We were told that in Genesis chapter 3. What future does God prophecy for us there? The growth of a society only through pain and suffering. Division between husband and wife. A cursed creation that fights against us. Refuses to bear the food that we need for us. Unless we work and work and work at it.

And finally, death. When we return to the ground. For out of it we were taken. Dust we are and to dust we will return.

Given a choice between the two visions of the future, I'd much rather have Gene Roddenberry's. But given the history of humanity. Given thousands of years of natural disasters. And poverty. And wars and rumors of wars. And persecution. And tribulation. Given all of that, well... the Biblical one seems a lot more accurate.

And that's depressing. I mean, Gene Roddenberry wrote Star Trek because he wanted to express his hopeful vision of the future. He wanted to share it with the world. And people listened. Because people like to hear a hopeful message.

They watched his shows. And watched his movies. And they went to conventions. And they became almost obsessed with his fiction. Largely because it gave them hope. Even if it was a false hope. Even if it contradicted everything they saw with their own eyes. Everything that history ever told them about sinful human nature and a fallen world.

And the funny thing is that you'll see that in almost every religion. I could spend hours talking about all the different ways that Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism and Confucianism and Animism and Wicca and every other worldview on this planet tries to give people hope in humanity's ability to stop sinning. In humanity's ability to fix its own problems. Even though we've never done it. In the history of the planet. It's all false hope.

One of the things that sets the Bible apart from virtually every other religious text is that it tells it like it is. Which isn't always very fun to hear. It isn't fun to hear how we and all creation were cursed with death and division from the very beginning because of our own sinfulness. It isn't fun to hear that there's nothing we can do to end that death and division because all we do is keep on sinning. It isn't fun to hear that it's only going to get worse. It isn't fun, but it's the truth. And I think, deep down, we know it.

But, for me, that makes the truth of Jesus' victory over sin that much more powerful. That much more hopefully. Because when I open up God's Word and Jesus describes a world that pretty closely matches what I see when I turn on the news – that pretty closely matches what I see in my own heart – that gives me reason to trust his message. And the message of the prophets who came before him. And the message of the apostles' who came after him.

And what you'll find in the midst of all those messages is hope. True hope. Hope that those who endure to the end will be saved. Hope that though we die and return to the dust of the earth, just as God said we would, there will come a day when we awake and rise out of the dust of the earth. Hope that my name is written in the book of life.

You see, Daniel writes that those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above. That wisdom isn't the wisdom of the world. It's not the wisdom that comes from knowing science and technology and art and culture and history and philosophy. It's not the wisdom of humanity being the best it can be.

No, it's wisdom that comes from God. It's the wisdom of looking around at God's creation, at the sky above and the stars in the heavens. Looking around at the sinful nature of things and realizing that all this was described in God's Word. Only a fool looks at the history of this sinful world and says, "Hey look, things are getting better."

A wise man looks at all this and says, "No, things aren't getting better. Things aren't going to get better. Not unless God himself comes down from heaven and fixes this broken world. Not unless God himself raises me out of the dust of the earth and makes me shine like a star in the sky will I ever bring righteousness to the world. Will I ever make anything better."

Our hope is not in ourselves. We're not the solution to the problems of this world. We are the problem with this world. But thanks be to God, He has already written our names in the book of life. He has promised us, "I will remember your sins and your lawless deeds no more." And he who promised that is faithful.

So let us stir up one another with love and good works, meeting together and encouraging one another. Not because such things will solve all the problems in the world. They won't. But because the day is drawing near. The day when all we hope for will be seen. The day when those whose endured to the end will be saved. Amen.