

Sermon: "Out of Control"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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OUT OF CONTROL Matthew 24:25-44

Her father was dying of dread disease. And she didn't know what to do or say. It was the first time in her life that I had seen her that way. Up until this time I would have described her as an "ice queen." She was good looking, perfect in fact. Her hair was always meticulously groomed and her makeup was flawless. I knew that she ruled her perfect husband, family and household with an iron hand. She liked being in control. I found her frightening.

Most people who didn't know her viewed her as successful. After all, the modern world is obsessed with control, and she was a prime example of a person who was definitely in control.

The technology that many of us praise is all about using our expanding knowledge to give us more of what we want and keeping us in control in every situation. Try counting the many ways that we use that word, control. We talk about population control and birth control. We live and shop in climate controlled buildings.

American Express offers me a card in the mail. What is their pitch? "Take charge of your life. Get control of your finances with this card." And yet control is a fleeting commodity.

As long as our computers and our air conditioning work, we can take on the world. But, it doesn't take much to change things. Let a few hurricanes blow through and everything comes to a screeching halt. We are out of control.

And that's what my friend learned when things went bad in her life.

She valued control more than anything else, but now her life was out of control. In addition to her father's illness her husband had lost his job, her job was in jeopardy and they would have to move out of their dream home into a more modest abode.

Funny, I began to like her much better when things were going bad for her, when her life was not so perfect. With things out of control she became in many ways a better person. Faith played a greater role in her life, she was more compassionate and she was less critical of those who didn't live up to her "high standards."

My friend learned what all of us learn painfully many times during our lives. Control is an illusion.

THE LESSON OF 911

Our whole country should know that. On a beautiful morning in September several years ago all of us learned that hard lesson. When the towers fell in New York and the Pentagon was attacked, it was more than just a terrible tragedy.

Collectively, as a nation we had this sense of everything being out of control. It was literally "a bolt out of the blue" and our world did change. No longer did we have a sense of security.

Before the attack of September 11, we had the most secure borders, the largest army, and the biggest economy; yet it was not enough to prevent the attack. It seemed like we were no longer in control, and we are a people who value control.

In some ways I liked what was going on in our country a lot better during those uncertain days after September 11, 2001. People turned and returned to their faith for comfort and counsel. We courageously faced challenges and pulled together.

Despite the terrible consequences of the attack that day, there was also a softening of the American heart. Uncertainty made us willing to listen, at least for a while.

GOOD NEWS THAT STARTS OUT BAD

Today's lesson teaches us that good news can come in the form of great disruption. We are at ease in Zion. We think we have it made, and we become complacent.

We assume that tomorrow will be just like today.

Quite often that is a false assumption. Our lesson tells us that in the days of Noah people were eating and drinking and doing the normal things that people do right up until the big flood swept it all away. I wonder if from time to time we need to have our world turned upside down in order to get our priorities straight.

I would be very reluctant to say that God causes a calamity to come our way. We don't know why many bad things happen. But, I do believe that God often uses disruptions in our life to remind us that we are not in control. Through the struggles of difficult times, God presents us an opportunity to trust in His grace and salvation instead of our own resources.

This is a theme found throughout the Bible. Over and over again God uses big, disruptive changes in order to call His people out of their sin to a life of faith and hope.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

For example, in the book of Genesis we read about how people first fell in love with technology and the control it seemed to give them. The new technology of the ancient world was brick making.

No longer did they have to build buildings out of stone and pitch. Now they could use brick and mortar.

And the people said,
"Wow, we could build a building all the way to heaven with this stuff. Who needs God when you have bricks?"

Well, as it turns out, they were wrong. They didn't finish their stairway to heaven.

Instead, they all began speaking a different language, the tower was left in disarray and it became known as the Tower of Babel, a potent reminder that even the best technology can't get us to heaven.

In fact, quite often instead of making our life better technology leads us to disappointment and utter confusion.

In the story of the Tower of Babel, God used the confusion to teach the people a lesson. They were not in control.

We need to learn that same lesson.

JESUS THE CHANGE AGENT

Many have sought to tame the message of Jesus. But, the message of Jesus never has been and never will be a tame one. Understood properly, the message of Jesus is also disruptive and threatens to bring about societal change of cataclysmic proportions.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus talks about a new day in which the poor receive good news; freedom is proclaimed for the prisoner and recovery of sight is given to the blind.

In short, He lifts up those who are considered the least in society while bringing down those who think that they are in charge.
(Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus even promotes the idea that God's love extends to those that are our enemies. (Luke 4:24-30)

It made the people in his hometown of Nazareth so mad that they wanted to kill him. Eventually, that's what they and some others did. We should understand why they did it. They wanted to get control of the situation.

Jesus was a loose cannon who didn't play by the rules. How can a people expect to survive when they cater to the needs of the poor instead of the rich? How can a nation expect to survive when she meets the hostility of an enemy with love?

Anyone who has this view today might not be crucified, at least literally. But, they wouldn't be very popular, and they certainly wouldn't get elected!

THE DISTURBING SAVIOR

So they crucified Jesus because the kingdom he spoke about was just too radical, just too different from what most people wanted in a Messiah.

But, the crucifixion didn't have the desired effect.

Instead of gaining control they lost control forever. With the Spirit of the Risen Christ on the loose all bets were off and according to our lesson for today, they still are.

The coming Messiah still disturbs our quiet, settled life. If we really understand it, we too won't like the message that Jesus brings.

I'm convinced that we, like those who have gone before us, really don't want a large, powerful God who comes to radically change our world. We don't want a God who is unpredictable and dangerous, who comes like a thief in the night.

We want a God who "feels our pain" and gives us solace. Unfortunately, this is just not the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

REDEFINING GOD

Alan Roxburgh, a keen analyst of the modern church, talks about a fundamental shift that has taken place in the churches of the Western World and especially in the churches of North America.

He wrote that the Christian story is “no longer about God and what God is about in the world; it is about how God serves and meets human need.

More specifically, the God who encounters us in Jesus Christ has become the spiritual food court for the personal private, inner needs of expressive individuals.

The result is a debased, compromised, Gnostic form of Christianity which is not the Gospel at all.”

This is the great heresy of our time.
It transcends all denominations and all political leanings.

We want a small, “therapeutic” God, a God that cares about us but who is generally ineffective.

As one commentator put it, “In the modern world where we are in alleged control, we don’t want much of a God.

And most of us, therefore, don’t get much of a God.”

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

If that’s the kind of God you want, a God who is all about meeting your needs, don’t come to church during Advent!

You’ll be disappointed.

Along with the Advent candles and the other decorations, every year we bring out the big, disruptive God who messes with our safe settled world.

He’s never what we expect. He comes upon us like a “thief in the night.” (Matthew 24:42-44) People are separated (24:41), and the world is changed forever.

I, like so many of you, often pray for God’s care and for safety, especially during the uncertain times. I think God has compassion on us and understands our heart.

There is nothing wrong in expressing our needs to God. There is nothing too great and nothing too small. We can take it all to the Lord in prayer. Sometimes our prayers are answered, our hearts are comforted, and we rightly give God the glory.

But, even though we have the privilege of taking everything to God in prayer, don’t think that God’s job is to always give us what we want. Quite often just the opposite is true.

In Jesus we see a world that is being dismantled in order that it might be reassembled according to God’s specifications. The subject of faith is not our needs. Our needs are not

the priority in God's kingdom. The subject of theology is God and God's greater plans for the world.

And we need to figure out how to fit in to those plans. We need to get with God's program instead of trying to get God to sign off on our plans.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVENT

That's why it's important to listen to the lessons of Advent. During Advent we enter a place where the skies turn dark, the earth heaves and there are cosmic signs of distress.

It is hard to maintain the illusion of control when we place our rather inconsequential lives alongside such events.

And maybe that's what we need. We need to have the delusion of control ripped away from us so that we can wake up to what is really happening. We need to get ready.

No matter how much I preach on these Advent passages, I realize that I need to hear them again and again. I need to hear them because I am, like everyone else, forever going back to the delusion of control.

I think that I can change just a little and it will be enough. I fall once again for the heresy that it's all about my needs and me.

But, the story is much, much bigger than that.

All of life is a struggle to change this way of thinking. And somehow the dark, difficult news of Advent helps us.

Somehow these symbolic lessons about the old world ending remind us, as no other passages of Scripture can, that our modern world is built upon the shaky foundation of pride and self-deceit.

This world must give way to a new world,
a new kingdom that was preached about and embodied by Jesus long ago.

PREPARING FOR A THIEF

The kingdom of God made its decisive appearance in the man Jesus but there is still more to come. We need to be alert. Like a bolt out of the blue or a thief in the night the kingdom of God will come.

Have you ever been the victim of a thief? I have. It was a very troubling experience that in some ways changed my whole life. I'm more security conscious, more alert because I have been victimized in that way.

I have a monitored alarm system. I have dogs that bark when a stranger approaches. I pay attention to people hanging around my home. I'm alert.

Jesus tells us that our preparation for the kingdom of God needs to be similar to how we would prepare for a thief.

When it comes to preparing for a burglar, it has to be an every day thing because no one knows when the thief will come. Every day we must turn on the alarm. Every day we must lock the doors.

In the same way, we must prepare every day for the coming of God's kingdom.

We drag out these dramatic Advent passages once a year and then put them away along with the Christmas decorations. But, maybe we need to have a little bit of Advent every day.

Maybe we should spend some time every day considering the priorities of our life in light of eternity.

Who knows? Today might be the day.

THE HAPPY CONFLAGRATION

A friend sent me a copy of a story that the philosopher Kierkegaard told. It was entitled "The Happy Conflagration" and the subtitle asked the question, "What happens to those who try to warn the present age?"

Kierkegaard wrote,

"It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theater. The clown came out to inform the public. They thought it a jest and applauded.

He repeated his warning. They laughed even louder.

So, I think the world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits, who believe that it is a joke."

Many of us have become a little too comfortable with ourselves and the world in which we live.

The warning that Jesus gives us today is no joke. We must be ready. The kingdom of God comes at an unexpected hour and in an unexpected way.

Friends, let's give up our delusion of control.

The world is not in our hands. It is in God's hands. Thank God for that. And that makes every day a day of preparation, and a day of hope.

Amen.

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