

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Sunday, Dec. 3, 2023

Message: "Vigilant Love"

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Scriptures

Isaiah 64:1-9

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
2 as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down; the mountains quaked at your presence.
4 From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
5 You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.[b]
6 We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
7 There is no one who calls on your name
or attempts to take hold of you,
for you have hidden your face from us
and have delivered[c] us into the hand of our iniquity.
8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Mark 13:24-37

24 "But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
25 and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

26 “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. **27** Then he will send out the angels and gather the[a] elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

28 “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. **29** So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he[b] is near, at the very gates. **30** Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. **31** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. **33** Beware, keep alert,[c] for you do not know when the time will come. **34** It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. **35** Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, **36** or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. **37** And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Sermon: Vigilant Love

A lot of people read the text from Mark 13 and say, “The world didn’t pass away within a generation of Jesus’ lifetime? What is he talking about, we’re still here!” Now is one of those times I ask you to put your nerdy history glasses on, as understanding the context of what you’re reading is relevant to understanding it.

Approximately 40 years after Jesus’ death, Jerusalem and its Holy Temple were entirely destroyed by the Romans. For the Jews living there at the time, this was indeed the End of Days. As Mark was writing his Gospel, he was likely hiding in a cave, listening to the sound of death and destruction happening around him as his community fell. The Romans proceeded to kill almost all the inhabitants of Judea, and those who survived were pushed out of the region into far away lands like Europe and Africa indefinitely.

Mark *did* accurately predict the End of Days, but misunderstood the timing of restoration for Jerusalem and the Son of Man arriving in great power and glory. Mark thought this would happen immediately and it didn’t. The Jews were never returned home, no Son of Man came in a Cloud of Glory to save them, and they remained uprooted in foreign lands until the Holocaust in the 1940s.

After those terrible events in World War II, superpowers in Britain, France, and the United States decided it was finally time for the Jews to go back to their homeland as a sympathetic gesture to the long, historical battle of death and displacement that Jews had experienced for their entire existence. Many Christians support the returning of the Jews to their historical homeland in 1948 because they believe that this return will hasten the Second Coming of Christ that Mark predicted so long ago. For those Christians, the return of the Jews to Israel is simply a pawn in the chess game of organizing the arrival of the Son of Man in Glory that didn’t happen 2,000 years ago.

But see, in that 2,000 year gap between the Temple's destruction and now, Jerusalem didn't sit vacant. If you look at old maps of the region from Jesus' time, the area was made up of tribal nations rather than the modern border states that we have presently. The areas around Jerusalem and Bethlehem belonged to a tribe called Judea, which was the Jewish ruling class; to the North was Samaria, which were considered an underclass of pseudo-Jews, and farther north were the Galileans, also a Jewish tribe, which is where Jesus was from. Along the coast from modern day Tel Aviv into Egypt was the fishing tribe known as the Philistines, and to the west the Ammonites, all documented in the Bible as peoples living in the Holy Land since the beginning of known history.

When the Jews were expelled by the Romans in 70 AD, the coastal Philistines remained and eventually spread out as the Roman empire faded away and was replaced by the Christian and Muslim Empires in more recent years. Under the rule of the Islamic Empire from 900 AD-1916 AD, the area was called Philistine, or "Palestine" in English, as the native population remaining there were mostly the Philistines.

When the Jews were brought back to Palestine in 1948, the Philistines were forcibly removed from their homes in an event they call the "Nakba," meaning "Catastrophe." They were placed in internment and refugee camps until a suitable solution for their permanent relocation was decided, which as we're seeing in the news, never happened and has only created chaos ever since.

I visited one of those Palestinian refugee camps in Bethlehem during Advent of 2011 and stayed with a Palestinian Christian family living there. They had a newborn, and there were 3 of us staying with them from our group. We brought gifts for the baby to the door and humorously hummed "We Three Kings of Orient" as we surveyed the irony of 3 visitors from a wealthy foreign country visiting a refugee newborn in Bethlehem during Christmastide.

The camp was built up into plain limestone apartments, because as days turned into weeks and months and years, the displaced Palestinians eventually needed more suitable structures to live in than tents. The family we stayed with had originally been olive farmers on the other side of the 25 ft barrier wall that now separates Jerusalem from Bethlehem, and they had to obtain daily permits to get to their farms and the kids to their schools, and wait in line behind cages at gunpoint for hours every day just to get to their destinations and back. The father said that sometimes he'd get to his farm and find that all the water lines had been cut and the trees uprooted by Israeli settlers attempting to co-opt his land. The mother laughed as she told us a story about how once her son was late to school and decided to sneak through a hilly gap in the border wall instead of waiting in the hours-long security line. With excitement, she explained that he did make it to the other side, but the soldiers shot at him and he lost his balance as he ran and broke his leg. "But he made it to school on time! Even though his leg was broken and his friends had to carry him there and back," she chuckled.

You and I may hear stories like this with horror and wonder why she was laughing about such a terrible affair. I've noticed, in all the places I've worked with traumatized populations,

that some of the most awful stories are often accompanied by laughter. Sometimes our brains have no way to process something that shouldn't be other than to laugh at it.

And that's the key phrase here: those stories from Bethlehem are something that shouldn't be. These terrible things are not God's story for them, and that's why these stories feel incomprehensible to the point of laughter. Separation from God's story for us is an unnatural state for humankind, and when this happens, we see and commit atrocities so unfathomable that we can't comprehend it. That family shouldn't be living in a permanent refugee camp with no running water, living on a rationed single pot of water for weeks at a time, simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time when someone else wanted to come take their land. That family shouldn't be dealing with the daily problem of having their farm bulldozed or standing in cages for hours at gunpoint just to get to school.

The Jews shouldn't have had to flee their homes in Europe due to an unspeakable mass genocide. They shouldn't have had to flee their homes in ancient Judea during Jesus' lifetime because someone else wanted the land at that time, either. This shouldn't be, this shouldn't be. "We fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away," says Isaiah.

Terrible things like war, oppression, and genocide are a consequence of sin, or turning away from God's will. Mark 13 specifically asks us not to predict God's will for the final End of Days. Jesus tells us that no one knows the time or the hour but the Father. It's a sin to believe we can subvert God's timing by artificially creating it ourselves. Yet, we hear this argument about subverting God's timing unfortunately from all sides of the Israel Palestine conflict. The Islamic militants in Gaza believe they are expediting the Second Coming of Jesus by fighting back ruthlessly to the point of killing their own civilians (because yes, Muslims also believe Jesus will come back at the End of Days). The Zionists believe they are expediting the coming of the Messiah by returning to the land (they believe the Messiah predicted in Isaiah hasn't come yet at all). The American Christians believe that bringing the Jews back to Palestine will kickstart the Son of Man arriving in a Cloud of Glory. The modern story of Israel and Palestine is one long fight over subverting God's will to bring the New World on their time and willfulness, not His. And when we subvert God's will in favor of our own, terrible things happen.

When we sin by believing we can cleverly override God's time, much sorrow and suffering is created. No one is happy in the Holy Land. Israelis and Palestinians alike are deeply suffering in this situation. I simply cannot believe in a God who asks us to perpetuate human suffering in order to expedite His will. There's no evidence anywhere in the Gospels that Jesus expected the expansion of His Kingdom to look anything like the human expansion of kingdoms that involves conquering, genocide, and suffering of indigenous and vulnerable populations, even though the Bible was used as a point of reference for justifying both the Holocaust and the Nakba. "We fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away," says Isaiah.

Jesus was asking us to do the exact opposite of vengeance in the face of the End of Days. Jesus asked us, as the world fell around him and he died mercilessly on a cross, to spread a new message of radical Love, even and especially as the walls of the Temple fell and crushed the lives of his community. In the midst of this grim reality He lived in, Jesus set captive

hearts free, healed the sick, and brought joy and hope. Jesus didn't see human beings as "collateral damage" for an end goal. He was adamant that even the most lost among us can be redeemed. Jesus saw the imminent End of Days and yet still hoped for and even demanded that humankind unite itself in transformative love through Him. He didn't react with a sword, or a plan for revenge and pillaging, or mass murder of His enemies.

When the world feels like it's ending for us, when terrible things happen in our lives like death of a loved one or sudden loss of a home, Jesus asks us not to subvert His time for redemption. We can't speed up the happy ending, and when we try, we only make it worse. Instead, he asks us to wait in Hope. God's plans are always better than our plans, and our attempts to subvert His plans only lead to death and destruction.

Waiting in Hope, however, isn't passive. Jesus tells us we can't fall asleep while we're waiting for His plan to unfold. In this season of Waiting in Hope, Jesus asks us to remain vigilant. So what does vigilance mean, if not waiting in the shadows with a sword, prepared to attack?

The End of Days has happened many times over – from the Roman overthrow of ancient Judea, to the Palestinian Nakba, to the burning of Lahaina. Remaining vigilant during these events means to love radically even and especially when the world is burning. The vigilance Jesus calls us into happened when we came together to wrap Lahaina in loving support, so that the people of the land could stay there instead of getting overtaken by rich investors vulturing their misfortune. That was God's love overpowering human greed. The vigilance Jesus calls us into happens when we hold the hand of a grieving mother or widow instead of casting her out to be alone. That is God's love overpowering human fear. The vigilance Jesus calls us into happens when we recognize the pain of history for the Israelis and Palestinians, instead of viewing them as pawns for an artificially created end game. This is God's love overpowering hate and division.

We have work to do as we wait for Jesus' triumphant return in His time. That work is to Love God and others with all our hearts, minds, and souls. Jesus asks us to uplift the oppressed and the captive and bring them to His redemption, even and especially when those people seem too deep in their sinfulness. Jesus asks us to repent and clean ourselves so that we have the strength to Love even when we feel like we should be crumbling into hate and despair. In places where there is darkness, Jesus asks us to bring His Light. In places where there is pain, Jesus asks us to bring His Healing. In places where there is hopelessness, Jesus asks us to bring faith. Love is the vigilance He expects from us.

I don't know what will happen to the people of Israel and Palestine. I don't know what's going to happen to you, or me, this church, Lahaina, or anything else. But I do know that if we do the vigilant work of Love through the End of Days in all its forms, He will come back to us in His time. Amen.