



# These Are Not Signs

*TEXT*  
*Mark 13:24–27, 32–37*

November 29, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**I**t's Advent. We light the Advent candle of hope, just like we always do.

We draw near to the old stories of that silent night, just like we always do.

We sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, and we come again to the table of grace, just like we always do.

But this year, it feels a bit harder. Do you ever get discouraged by the way things are? Do you ever wonder if all of this really matters?

Churches all across the globe today will read this story of the return of the Son of Man. Tradition places this story on the first Sunday of Advent every year. It's strange. Technically, this is what scholars call apocalyptic language. It's not our first tongue. It uses larger than life images to communicate truth. But it seems bizarre to us today. No one talks like this anymore.

In 1796, George Washington said: "Friends and fellow citizens: the period for a new election of a citizen to administer the executive government of the United States being not far distant, and the time actually arrived when your thoughts must be employed in designating the person who is to be clothed with that important trust, it appears

to me proper, especially as it may conduce to a more distinct expression of the public voice, that I should now apprise you of the resolution I have formed, to decline being considered among the number of those out of whom a choice is to be made." Huh?

LBJ said it this way: "I will not seek and will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your president." Not as eloquent, but no one talks like Washington anymore. However, to assume that because the language is out of date it has nothing to say would be foolish.<sup>1</sup> Apocalyptic language is a strange language, but it has something to say, and I think we need to hear it. At least I do.

The challenge with this text is not just that it reads like science fiction; there is a deeper difficulty. This passage is an insult to our egos. Jesus declares that we are never going to get things right. Injustice will always be with us. Our righteousness will never be pure. The world will always be awash with oppression. Sin is stronger than we think. Evil will be the companion of every generation.

It says it this way:

Jesus tells his followers that the world will end, and they ask, what will the signs be? He says,

when there are wars and rumors of wars, when there are earthquakes and famines, when you are dragged into court because of your faith, when nursing mothers cannot care for their children, when the good you do only results in punishment ... these aren't signs of the end. These aren't really signs of anything. This is normal. Suffering and brokenness and failure is not some mystery that needs an explanation. It's the reality of every life.

The suffering of our days caused by COVID, systemic racism, attacks on truth and rumors of civil war ... well, all of this was preceded in other generations by wars and world wars and civil wars. There was AIDS and polio and the bubonic plague. There was sex slavery, slavery, the middle-passage and ... well, you get the picture. We talk like suffering is an aberration to a normal life that requires an explanation. But suffering and failure is more the norm for most. The suffering of our lives is real, in many cases devastating; but we really can't sing "nobody knows the trouble I've seen," because sadly, many have known. The brokenness of our time is not a sign of the end. Sadly, this is the norm.

So, it makes you wonder, what matters? If this is the way things always are, what really matters?

You probably have one of these [recycling bin].

Every Wednesday evening, I carry this out to the curb. It's filled with recyclable plastic. It has these triangles with the numbers to tell us what works. I have been doing this all of my adult life. I'm not alone; I bet you do this too. I imagine most Americans participate in recycling their plastic. We know this stuff is terrible for the environment. It's a small but concrete expression of my faith. To care for the earth is faithful.

But in September, NPR reported that by and large, this doesn't get recycled.<sup>2</sup> It just gets buried or burned or pushed out to sea. All the sorting and separating we do doesn't matter — because we haven't figured out how to recycle plastic and make money doing so. We can't afford it, so we don't. NPR also reported that this whole time the plastics industry and the oil companies have known this, and yet spent millions in advertising campaigns encouraging us to do something they knew wouldn't happen. So, while I thought my walk to the curb on Wednesday night was making a difference, it was and continues to be for nothing.

Sometimes it feels like no matter how hard we try, the brokenness of this world just doesn't end.

We fill the shelves of the food pantry, but it will never be enough.

We seek to be honest people, but every day we are surrounded by lies.

We endeavor to be fair with one another, but injustice, tipped scales, rules bent toward the powerful is the way of the world.

That's the confession of apocalyptic truth. We will never win. Things will never be completely right. Evil will emerge in every generation. Things will never be right, not completely. War and rumors of wars, famines and the innocent being dragged to court ... Jesus says, these aren't signs of anything; this is just life.

But if I have given you the impression that things are hopeless, I have misled. For Jesus does more than just tell us the truth about us; he also tells the truth about God. And if I understand the text, he says this: God will do what we can't.

That's what all that Son of Man rides the clouds imagery is about. God will do what we can't. In the end, it is the good that will remain; none of it will be lost. The broken will be mended, the injured will be healed, because love is the greatest power in the world, and love will win. In the end, it is the ways of Jesus that will last.

And then Jesus says the most wonderful, hopeful, beautiful words: "Keep awake."

That's a hard thing to hear because I know how weary you are right now. "Keep awake" seems difficult.

It sounds like we should be a little afraid that Jesus is going to return and find you slothful on the sofa before reruns of *Law*

& *Order*. No, this is an apocalyptic promise: It says even in these messed up days, what you do matters. The good that you do, those moments when you lean into your better angels, the generosity you practice ... it all matters. Good doesn't get lost.

If I understand the text, the promise of Jesus is we don't have to win to matter. We don't have to change the world to still make a difference.

Will we ever get it perfect? No, but the good does not get lost.

Many of you know that my dad died last month. He was a giant and great dad, and I was blessed beyond measure to have him in my life as long as I did. So many of you have faced a loss like this, so you know grief is grief, and it is a bit sloppy at times. But I have learned something. I received cards and emails and texts that just said, "Hey, I'm sorry." It's amazing how healing kindness can be. I still miss my dad, of course. But simple kindness is a power. And it doesn't get lost.

The good you do in your life matters. It may not win because the forces of death and injury are strong in this world. But the good matters.

So, we will keep filling our shelves at the pantry.

And we will keep opening books with young children who are struggling to read.

And we will keep sending money to places that need it the most.

And we will continue to push against the forces that oppress our neighbors.

And I am going to continue to carry my plastic to the curb, partly to declare that taking the earth for granted is something we can't afford.

And after all of that, things will still be a mess. But because God is love, God will complete what we have left incomplete. And the good will never be lost.

That's why we light the candle of hope today. Just like we always do.

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<sup>1</sup>His speech of September 1796 is read in the halls of Congress every year on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February.

<sup>2</sup>NPR broadcast September 11, 2020, "How Big Oil Misled the Public Into Believing Plastic Would Be Recycled," by Laura Sullivan

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.