

Sermon Series: Questions God Asks:

“Can we know the day or hour?” by Jason Byassee

Mark 13: 32 - 37

Boone UMC

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I'm grateful to all of you for today—Dana for leading our children's play for Mother's Day, musicians for leading us in worship. And all of us are thankful for mothers today. Mother's Day was created by a Methodist lay person in West Virginia, I'm guessing she was someone who felt like her kids didn't call home often enough. There's a kind of exquisite pain to being a mother. Soren Kierkegaard describes the way a mother suffers from a child's physical progression from physically right under her heart, then born and at her breast, then holding her hand, then toddling off on her own, then grown up, and won't call. This is a good day to call mothers, to thank them, to reach out to those who aren't your biological mother but who have loved well, to sit with those who mourn mothers or not being a mother. In the church we have lots of mothers and grandmothers—they all need someone to reach out to them with love today. Or maybe this, for you to say to your mother whether she can hear you or not, whether she's asking you for it or not, I forgive you. It's a poignant day, thank you for spending it in worship here at Boone Methodist.

Today is also part of our series on Questions God Asks. Today's question, perhaps a little strangely for Mother's Day, is, “When is Jesus coming back?” He came once to begin saving the world. He promises to return to make all things new. So Christians have wanted to know the answer to this since he left us the first time. Our first generation thought the answer would be tomorrow. Don't buy green bananas, Jesus is coming soon. But we realized quickly wait, that's not happening right away. So Jesus has been coming soon for nearly 2000 years. By the time this passage from Mark is written folks have started to wonder, hey, is this coming back thing for real? Hear what Jesus says, what question God asks today.

Mark 13:32-37

32 About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Beware, keep alert, 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.

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the Easter people of God, **thanks be to God.**

I've loved this series on questions God asks. It allows us to see that Christianity is a matter of struggling with questions. And we're not the only ones asking. God asks us some too. The one the ancient Christians asked was this: Where are you Jesus? Anybody ever ask that in your lives? Where are you? I mean you promised you'd come and it's been a while, we've been standing here on the street corner waiting, hurry along now please Jesus.¹ In response to our strongest questions God ultimately points to the cross. It's an absurdity that the best one of us dies the worst death. And God shrugs his mighty shoulders and reminds us that a resurrection is coming. And notice his mother Mary is by his side as he dies, showing us a mother's love at its most painful. This is what I love about Christian faith. It doesn't hide its faultlines. Here in this text it's clear Mark's church is struggling. This gospel was written just after 70 AD, some 40 years after Jesus' resurrection. That's a couple of generations, people have lived and died and no sign of a return. The text is naked and bald about this - remember Jesus said to keep awake...because he'd be coming soon. When did he say that? 40 years ago? The definition of the word "soon" keeps getting stretchier.

We have visions of the apocalypse all around us. Apocalypse is just a 10 cent word meaning "unveiling." The curtain is pulled back and you see things for what they are.² The zombie movie epidemic is one example. It says the end is near, science will turn on us and we'll eat each other. Yuck. Another is environmentalism. The end is near and we're ruining things and will all die. Anyone in here over about age 35 grew up with nightmares of nuclear annihilation. Apparently visions of the end of the world are more common than we thought. One Christian I admire was asked if he was optimistic about the future. Of course, he said, the future includes Christ's return. Now that's a very different end to the story.

But notice the question Jesus won't answer. When.³ "About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." We ask Jesus, "Hey when are you coming back?" And he says, I don't know. How does Jesus not know when he's coming back? Most of the church thinks he knows, he's just not talking. Notice he says you can't know the day or the hour. Some Christians have said, well you can know the month! So, by the end of October, or whenever . . . Christianity talks enough about the end of the world that folks have often gotten a little too excited. Around 1000 AD folks sold their stuff and gathered on a hillside to wait and

¹ http://www.jesus-story.net/images/Matthias_Grunewald_Isenheim_Altarpeice.jpg

² <http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/onepercent/2013/03/06/Zombies-Run.jpg>

³ Mk 13:32

nothing happened. Around 1844 another batch of people here in America did the same. You'll remember the poor guy who was convinced the end was coming soon, put up billboards everywhere, and had a stroke when it didn't. Soon keeps getting stretchier. And that's ok. What Jesus is saying is this, I don't know when. You don't know when. So live your life the best way you can in the meantime. You may have seen the bumper sticker, Jesus is coming, look busy? I've thought as I get ready to move away this summer, wow, if I'd known this was my last year I'd have worried less about this. I'd have invested more of myself over here. What are we waiting for? Live now! Enjoy every moment like it's the last you'll get because someday you'll be right. There is an urgency, an immediacy in Christianity, live for Christ beautifully now, because who knows if we'll get tomorrow? A friend of mine was at a more conservative church than he usually goes to. He's a minister, his wife was with him. And he heard a standard fire and brimstone sermon about how you might not make it home in your car after church. Better repent now. How ignorant! He said. So manipulative! She agreed. Then they looked at each other. Course, dude might be right. They buckled up. Those who read the bible are right to be urgent. They're just wrong to pick a day. If Jesus doesn't know I suspect we won't either, ok?

In the meantime we can pray. It's a strange mystery prayer isn't it? I mean last week we're looking for a place to live in Vancouver, and it's terrifying, most expensive city to live in in the world. Y'all make it so easy for us ministers we just move into your house. But we're on our own. And I'm praying. And thinking this is ridiculous. I mean Baltimore is burning. Nepal is in agony. People are actually hurting there. But God never says "I don't have time for you." God always says pray. Give me everything you feel. Hold it up. And I'll respond. Not by giving what you want, no good mother says yes to every request. But with love. And God does that in Baltimore, in Nepal, in the little battles in our hearts. Prayer is a way of keeping awake. Being alert. Watching for Jesus. It doesn't make everything turn out right. It reminds us of who we are and who God is and what's coming one day.

Waiting for the kingdom is I think like being pregnant. It'll end. Hopefully beautifully, hopefully not badly, but certainly it doesn't go on forever. And I'm told and I've seen a few of these giving birth feels like the end of the world. It's a kind of apocalypse, that is, everything is ripped apart. And something new is born. That's how God works. We don't know quite when the end will come. We just know it will. And it'll hurt. And it'll be beautiful. Something new will get born and we'll never be the same.

There's a new book out by the manager of the St. Louis Cardinals. Not your sturdiest intellectual fare but bear with me academic Boone. He left a 13 year major league career to coach his kid's

youth baseball team. And he realized wait, parents don't know how to do this. They yell at their kids at games. Yell at the umpires. Make their kids miserable and ruin the thing and their kids want out. So Matheny wrote a blog post (such a 21st century response) and he said this, parents, your kids want you silent at games. Don't cheer so they can hear. They're already under enough pressure. Be there and be quiet. Baseball is a game where if you fail 2/3rds of the time they put you in the hall of fame. And don't complain about the umps. They're 17 years old making minimum wage assume every call will be wrong. Look what he's doing. Telling his folks how to be a parent, which is sort of like telling them how to be a human being. That's what we're doing as Christians. We're saying here's how to be human. The best way to do it is to see that Jesus is returning. Be vigilant. Not crazy. Not lazy. Just ready.

Keep awake, Jesus keeps saying. Like we're sentry guards on duty, the whole army is counting on us being vigilant. Or like a trucker on a highway at the end of an eight hour shift, boy, keep awake, it's dangerous not to. We should be alert, vigilant, like a dancer on point ready for the first note. That's how our soul should be with regard to Jesus. Ready... anticipatory. Here's why. The end of the story always defines the story. Imagine if they ended *The Wizard of Oz* and we never know if Dorothy got back to Kansas...or if *The Hunger Games* cuts off and we don't know if Katniss ever gets her hands on the president. It'd be like reliving the 2015 basketball season and not knowing Duke would be crowned king (you didn't think I'd get through the whole spring and not mention that, did you?). The end defines the whole thing. I'm struck that you can't sum up a life until its done. Looking back after our life is over one can say hey, here's who this person has been among us. As Christians we get that. In the end is our beginning. The resurrection throws a light over the whole of Christ's life. Over ours' too.

But not in this story. This story is about darkness. Judgement. Gloom. Listen to Jesus:⁴ "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." Cock crow is an interesting time to mention. It's before the dawn, when roosters start making their noise.⁵ A rooster is a feisty animal. That's why folks fought them for years, still do secretly.⁶ Not a bad mascot for a certain SEC team (see I can get out of Duke/Carolina!). Here's something surprising.⁷ Lots of churches have roosters on the top of their churches (here's one we saw in

⁵ http://photos.the-scientist.com/legacyArticleImages/2012/10/10_12_Notebook01.jpg

⁶ http://www.sports-logos-screensavers.com/user/South_Carolina_Gamecocks.jpg

⁷ <https://patmcinerney.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/image243.jpg>

Jerusalem).⁸ Many guess it's a reference to Peter and his betrayal when the cock crows. To put a sign of betrayal on top of the building reminds us we all betray, and Jesus forgives. But that's probably not why the rooster is on top of the church. The reason is that when the cock crows dawn is coming. The rooster can see farther than the rest of us, he gets the first glimpse of the dawn. The church is that rooster, announcing the dawn that's coming before anyone else can see it. To put the critter on top of the building is to say Christ is coming. Soon. There's not a thing we can do to stop it. And now whenever we see a rooster or a chicken or any variant thereof we should remember the dawn that's on its way and give thanks. I remember the first mission trip I was on, sleeping on the porch of a little Honduran hut, and hearing a rooster crow all night. Dang, I thought, it doesn't crow just before dawn, it makes a ruckus all night long! That's us church. Making a ruckus all night long. The dawn is coming. We mean it. Soon. Live like it. Jesus is coming. Better love somebody.

I've been struck as I've mourned leaving this church how sorrow is the flip side of love. It's easy not to hurt in this world. Just seal your heart off. Don't love anybody and you won't get hurt. But of course then you're a non-human person. I've been delighted to love you for these years and will still—I get to report back to Boone Methodist as a sort of missionary to Canada, unusual in our system but good news. This would have been easy if it hadn't been so good, but it has been, so it's not. I hear some of the same from you. And here's the odd thing. When we grieve, we revisit old griefs. I find myself thinking about my mother a lot, who I lost 10 years ago, missing her. Why? Just because that hurts too, like this does. To love is to open yourself up to pain. And God loves us. God is open to pain. John Fitzgerald, my predecessor and now David's predecessor says to people in pre-marital counseling that when you two marry one of you will likely find the other dead one day. Not very romantic! But very serious, urgent even. So it is with any sort of love. And it's still right. Love always looks like a cross and a resurrection. Here's what the gospel says—God never loses a bit of our love. Not an ounce. He gathers it up, treasures it, and grows it, and will one day renew the world with it. David Hockett is a friend of many years. He's who I hoped bishop would send to us, but I hesitated to hope out loud lest it not happen. Every minister I see says Hockett, that's perfect! And so it is. Love him. He'll love you too. And we'll grow together. I can't promise it won't hurt. In fact I can promise the opposite, it will. And it'll be good. There's a resurrection at the far end of that cross. And it's the only way to it.

⁸ http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/79/The_Denial_of_Saint_Peter-Caravaggio_%281610%29.jpg

Forgive me for closing with a story I've told you before.⁹ Two twins are in the womb. They're warm, safe, happy, together. And one says to another. I don't think this womb is all there is. The other doesn't believe it. Nonsense, this is all we've ever known, it's all there is. I get why you're skeptical, the first says. But I think there's a world out there. No chance. The first says, a bit more hesitantly this time, I think there's a mom. A mom? There's no mom, there's just us, here, in this womb. Ok, say what you want, I think there's a mom. I hear her heart beat, I hear her talk to us, I can tell when she hasn't eaten recently or when she's asleep. Ridiculous. We'll see.

Friends, on mother's day, in this life, there's a mom, a God. There's coming pain, I promise you. And there's more love, more delight, than we can imagine. You'll see. The whole world will see. And there's not a thing we can do to stop it or hurry it. Praise God. Amen.

⁹ <http://cdn.24.co.za/files/Cms/General/d/2108/766f9b751e684a50a48730b496fc551a.jpg>