



## WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Knoxville, TN

Dec. 3, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Sermon: "Love is Born of Faith"

### **Mark 13:24-37 (NRSV)**

13:24 "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,

13:25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

13:26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

13:27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

13:28 "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.

13:29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

13:30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

13:31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

13:32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

13:33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

13:34 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.

13:35 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,

13:36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

13:37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

### **“Love is Born of Faith”**

What memories do you hold close in Christmas time?

In my home growing up in Eastern North Carolina, my mother put electronic candles in each window of the house starting the day after Thanksgiving. And each evening, as darkness would fall, we performed a ritual of going room to room together, turning on each candle. Each candle had this wheel along the wire, that you would turn and click into place to turn it on. To this day, I have a tactile memory of feeling the satisfying click, and suddenly the dark room would be illuminated by a single point of light, shining out in the darkness.

What memories do you hold close in Christmas time?

Amy Jill Levine is professor emeritus of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School. She is unique in that she is a professor of New Testament who is also Jewish, so she approaches the text as an outsider to the Christian faith, always illuminating for her students and for me the deep Jewish roots of our Scriptures and traditions. She opens her book *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, talking about the impression such lights made on her as a child:

*When I was little, I thought of Christmas as about tinsel and toys, candy canes and poinsettia plants. Seeing decorated trees inside people's homes, I'd think to myself, "Christians live here." Houses that had lights on the outside indicated that the people inside were 'really Christian.' Somehow I got the impression that all these decorations were designed to make Jewish people happy. They certainly made me happy. They still do.<sup>1</sup>*

I love that idea, of Christmas decorations not just being for the people inside the home or for those who share our faith outside of it, but also simply to brighten the winter nights of our Jewish siblings in faith.

I was reminded of this part in Levine's book as my daughter and I drove home this past Wednesday evening. As we turned on the corner of Morell and Westland

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 9-10.

headed home, there was a house covered end to end with Christmas lights. A life-sized Santa waves at the cars. Giant presents sit at either end of the front door. The entire intersection is illuminated by this one house. And as we passed, I drew her attention to it. “Look, Look at the lights.” And with all the unbridled enthusiasm that a three-year-old can muster, she exclaimed at the top of her lungs, “That is a lot of Christmas!”

A lot of Christmas indeed.

What memories do you hold close in this time?

In the Gospel of Mark, in his longest and what turns out to be his final discourse before the Passion Narrative, Jesus speaks of the end of days. Quoting the Prophet Ezekiel almost word for word, he says,

*In those days...the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*

Darkness enfolds the earth in its last days, says the Gospel of Mark. Professor of New Testament Beverly Gaventa in her comments on similar passage in 1 Thessalonians, remarks

*The imagery of light and darkness occurs in a vast array of ancient texts, and the reasons for that are readily apparent. The darkness conjured up is that of night in a world that could not imagine instant, reliable illumination of the night. The contrast between day and night, light and darkness, was as dramatic a contrast as [one] could imagine. In no sense does [this] refer to skin color when [the text] speaks of darkness, and it is to the church’s great shame that such associations have been made.<sup>2</sup>*

In other words, as modern readers, we are charged to remember through this season that darkness in this text (and in so many of our cherished Advent texts) is not about color but rather about absence, the absence of light, the inability to see.

It is helpful to put Mark’s thirteenth chapter in conversation with the events surrounding Jesus’s prophesy, for they are full of those unable or unwilling to see the will and work of God:

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<sup>2</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 71.

Like in 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Mark, Jesus drives out the money changers of the temple, exclaiming,

*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers.*

And in the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter, Jesus says that the religious leaders of his days, those charged to help the people see the light of God, rather,

*devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.*

And then, immediately after our passage today, in the very next verse, chapter 14, verse 1,

*The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.*

And in the verses immediately before our text in ch. 13, Jesus mentions that his followers will be betrayed by their families, beaten in religious sanctuaries, handed over to imperial powers for trial.

So, when Jesus quotes Ezekiel about darkness spreading, and the absence of light, he is speaking both of his own final days and the persecutions that the Gospel's original readers endured, the powers and principalities of this world snuffing out the light.

Or, *trying* to snuff out the light. Another refrain throughout the gospel in these sections is the injunction for watchfulness and, indeed, despite all appearances to the contrary, the necessity of hope!

To quote another commentary I read this week,

*Thus, the [chapter's] repeated counsels not to be alarmed (v. 7), not to worry (v. 11) not to be gulled (v. 21); to hold fast under fire (v. 13), and to trust the Holy Spirit and God (v. 20).<sup>3</sup>*

Of course, the chapter culminates suddenly as Jesus predicts his return,

*Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory.*

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<sup>3</sup> C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 275.

A light shining in the dark.

So, *therefore keep awake*, the Gospel continues, *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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.*

I wonder, what does it mean for us to keep watch, to keep awake, in our day? Or conversely, what does it look like to fall asleep, in the darkness?

One thing to note, you don't remember when you fall asleep. It's an unconscious process we go through every night.

The gospel begs the question then: what are we getting used to?

Is it the images of suffering that we see every evening on the news? Images of those far, far away, otherwise out of mind?

Is it the images of desperation that we see closer to home,

- on street corners;
- under bridges;
- on the other side of town;
- or the outskirts in Appalachia?

Is it the suffering in our own lives

- Relationships that feel strained and perhaps always will;
- Grief we hold, and we hold, that we walk with every day;
- Illness or pain;
- Fear or dread;
- Anxiety of days to come;
- Sadness of days gone by?

The lists are endless. What connects them is how little convincing it takes, to make us believe that the absence of hope is more real than hope itself, darkness instead of light.

And it doesn't even need to be conscious for it to overcome you. You don't even remember falling asleep.

But then, we have Jesus's final words of his farewell address of Mark: *And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.*

W.H. Auden was one of the great poets of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The title of a poem that he wrote in the middle of his life reflects the date that he wrote it, "September 1, 1939."<sup>4</sup> He wrote it when he was newly immigrated from Britain to New York. The day he wrote the poem, September 1, 1939 was the same day that Germany invaded Poland. It was two days before Britain and France declared war. At that time, America, Auden's new home, was still struggling with the depression; it was still two years out from Pearl Harbor.

The poem begins speaking of the bleakness of that time,

*I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade:  
Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.*

I've always loved that opening, "*I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-second Street*"

You can picture him sitting in that local café, brooding on the heaviness of that time, writing those lines. The poem goes on for some time like that, touching on a number of subjects, often with notes of despair.

But in the end it turns to hope. I'll skip down to the final stanza, because I believe it rings true to our own time, our calling together in this time. Auden writes,

*Defenceless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;*

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<sup>4</sup> W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. (New York: Random House, 1991), 801-02. You can find the full poem at this link: <https://poets.org/poem/september-1-1939>

*Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.*

I'll read that last part again:

*May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.*

An affirming flame. I think about those candles in the window of my childhood home, similar to the ones that brought so much joy to Amy Jill Levine in her childhood, and to my daughter this past week.

The lights we shine in this season are appropriate representation of who we are called to be in this time, a time of absence, a time of weariness.

Together as a church, and singularly, as people of faith, we are called to be light and hope in a weary world, because we believe, and because we know, that negation and despair are not what rule this world. We believe in a love that is greater than death. And a peace more powerful than all the weapons this world has created, in its crazed drive towards self-destruction.

We hold our faith in a Savior, who comes with power and glory, not power-over others, but the power of love and care, a power that gives good news to the poor, release to the captive, hope and freedom to the oppressed. In various ways individually, and together, as a community of faith, we have seen his light, full of grace and truth. And through our faith we live in that hope and thus shine our lights out into the darkness, an affirming flame.

And when your light dims, when your hope grows weary, as hope inevitably does, remember places like this, a community founded to worship and proclaim the God

of love and justice. And even more, remember the people in your life who have shared the light of hope for you when all the world felt dark and cold.

Come back to that place, come back to that hope. And be that light for others, who may have fallen asleep in the dark.

What memories do you hold close in this time?

Remember, remember, this love born of hope. Amen.