

**November 17, 2024**  
**Albany Presbyterian Church**

Being able to see the future is a gift recognized in the Christian tradition that, through coming to God in discernment, you understand the will of God and can know where God is leading you and the world around you. Miriam, Deborah, and all the prophets of the scripture were seers who saw visions and dreams, heard voices, and could read the world in metaphors and symbols and understand what God was doing and will do in the world.

In his book *Jesus the Seer*, Ben Witherington says many refer to Jesus as a prophetic teacher, a Jewish seer, an eschatological prophet, and another Elijah. Witherington says, 'It explains how Jesus viewed himself, why he acted as he did regarding the signs, exorcisms, and miracles, why he took the steps he did during the last weeks of his life, and why he suffered a violent end as a result.'

It appears that way in our reading from Mark's gospel, where Jesus speaks about the end of the age. Sitting privately with Peter, James, John, and Andrew on Mount Olive opposite the temple, he is asked what he said earlier about the destruction of the temple where they were. He says, "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

Some commentators say that the passage would have spoken directly to the hearts and minds of the first readers of the gospel, for it was probably written during the Jewish-Roman war, which was from 66 to 75 C.E. Romans destroyed the second temple around 70 C.E., and the Jewish people at the time would have experienced great distress and even some would have seen what had happened to the temple. The gospel says that Jesus saw what was to come of the temple and how futile the grandeur of its architecture and engineering that some of his disciples were marbling at. "Towering buildings are not supposed to crumble to the ground. Oceans should not leap out of their seabed and flood miles inland. The ground is not supposed to shake and undulate. The sky is not supposed to form a funnel cloud and destroy a town.

We can relate. You might say there wasn't a time in history when we didn't experience such things, and the church throughout was made to think about eschaton, the divine plan for the end time. There were wars, violence, natural disasters, political and personal conflicts, pain, and suffering, like today, and even in all these things, we are supposed to continue to live in hope, eagerly waiting for what God is going to do for us. And yet, in such a time, we expect the prophets to call out and those who see the future to speak of what they see. People are drawn to those who interpret the signs and predict the future. And Jesus warns his friends of such.

Mark Sayer, a pastor of Red Church in Australia, says the study shows while there is a significant decline in church attendance, especially post-COVID, there is greater interest in supernatural things. People are greatly interested in spiritual things, both online and in person; those seeking fortune tellers, Tarot card shops, and clairvoyants are on the rise. He sees this as a response to fear and uncertainty about life and the future and that we live in a time when people look for signs of the things to come. Each time something tragic happens, like a hurricane, war, famine, or tornado, someone somewhere comes up with the calculations claiming some secret revelation about God's plan.

Verse 6 says that all these things are all part of things to come. They may be signs that the Kingdom of God is near. Yet, Jesus says these are only the beginning of the birth pain. The eschaton, the divine plan for the end times, is the end of God's plan, called "Teleo," which means completing God's purpose. It is, therefore, with Joy rather than fear or dread we welcome such a time, for it means God's plan for our salvation will be finally fulfilled, where the old is gone, and the new has come—no more tears and sorrows, but full of joy and happiness.

But these things are not accessible. We also experienced war and conflict, natural disasters, COVID and other pandemics, and even our own personal tragedies, which all caused us pain and sadness. The experience of loss of stability and security of life makes us feel vulnerable and frail. As it was for the community of Mark, losing the temple must have been like they had lost their place in the world, the loss of identity.

Jesus reminds us that though these things are as hard as they are, all that is what is to happen. We should not focus so much on how these things are and how they are the signs of the end times. But God is with us and the

Spirit is at work to bring God's plan for our salvation to completion. And that Jesus is coming before the end of the eschaton to guide us through to the new heaven and earth.

So, how does it apply to us, and how do we live here and now as we anticipate the future—the advent of Jesus' second coming, the completion of Telos, God's plan for our salvation?

Paul answers these questions for us as he speaks to the churches experiencing similar things as the community of Mark in the 70s to 90s CE. In the Book of Hebrews, he reminds the faithful to look to Jesus and remember how he promised to come again. They believed that Jesus would come again soon in their lifetime. Instead of despairing or overwhelmed, Paul writes to the church to encourage, remind each other, and strengthen each other in faith.

Through his sacrifice, Paul reminds them, Jesus took away our sins once and for all, and through faith in Jesus, we are made holy, and we can come to God freely. And this is according to how God planned, and as the prophets revealed, the Spirit of God is poured out upon our hearts and minds, God's law written in our minds. We have forgiveness of sins through Jesus, his death and resurrection, and God draws us near to him,

Therefore, in verse 22, Paul reminds us to draw near to God with a sincere heart and full faith. Secondly, through the forgiveness of sins and assurance of God's pardon, come to God in confidence and faith daily; as in our worship, we surrender our wrongs and failures to the one who sacrificed himself, and through prayer, we hold fast to the promise we made with God through our baptism. And so, we hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess and encourage one another to love and do good. This is the purpose of being the church together, so as we meet often, we do so because we need each other to encourage one another in all these things that keep us drawn near to God. As Paul says, these things are most important for us as the day approaches.

After September 11, churches in New York City were closed, devastated by what happened; like everyone else, they were in complete shock, and some of them lost their friends and loved ones in this tragedy. Except a church called St Paul's, just across the road from the World Trade Center. They kept their doors open and became a sanctuary and refuge for thousands of people, including the rescuers and volunteers. It was something close to a miracle that although they were the nearest church to the World Trade Center, they suffered no damage or were not affected because a giant Sycamore tree was planted next to the church that took most of the burnt debris.

St. Paul and their people did not even hesitate a moment; in response to the city's horror and sadness, the church provided a space for food, shelter, love, support, peace, and hope, available 24/7 for as long as the people needed. They also opened their doors to whoever needed to find a quiet space in the middle of the city and organized a counseling service for the traumatized and hurt. They became the beacon of hope.

Similarly, today, we, the Albany Presbyterian Church, are invited to recognize that we are also living in this liminal time, between the first and the second coming of Jesus, where God's telos is being fulfilled, and with all our life and the world with the wars and rumors of war, natural or man-made disasters happening around us God who poured his spirit on us, the law in our hearts, he speaks to us. He invites us to be part of his plan, so what does he invite us to do? How does he want us to be? As we see the day approaching.