

Title: Not if, but when
Text: Matthew 24.32-35
Theme: Be ready
Series: Matthew #111
Prop Stmt: I want to call my people to live with absolute confidence in God's promises.

Read Text:

Let's say that you are driving in a construction zone and you know that the speed limit is 55 and you know that a police officer is sitting just ahead shooting radar and you know that speeding tickets in construction zones are double the fine and double the points. How are you going to drive? The way that you drive is directly related to your belief in the certainty of that officer and the accountability that comes with it, right? If you know that an officer is just ahead, you will be more careful about how you drive. But, while the presence of a police officer may cause you to be more careful about how you drive, it does not mean that you love the law does it? The presence of the police officer does not necessarily fill your heart with affection for the officer.

Last Sunday I concluded the sermon by saying that I do not want you turn from your sin and trust in Christ because, if you don't, you will lose everything, although that is true. I want you to turn from your sin and trust in Christ because you are convinced that He loves you and in response, you love him. I don't want you to trust God because you fear the consequences. God is not satisfied with your fear and respect. That is a good place to begin, but he wants your heart. He wants you love him and trust him. He wants your love and trust of him to fuel and drive your obedience of him. So, let me give you another example that is better than the speeding zone one.

Let's say that you are 5 years old. Your dad tells you that when he comes home from work today he is going to bring you a red balloon, and he does. The next day he says when I come home from work today, I am going to take you out for some ice cream, and he does. The next day he says, when I come home from work today, I am going to bring you a new hat, and he does. Day after day he does this. Whatever he says he will do, he does. Your dad makes you little promises and keeps them. Your dad makes you big promises and keeps them. Your dad makes you promises that have a lot of detail and forethought to them, and keeps them. As you get older, your dad makes promises that are more like puzzles. Sometimes you figure them out, and sometimes you don't. But either way, he keeps the promise and if you didn't figure it out, he explains it to you. And it is not just you. Your dad does the same thing with your brother and your sister and your mom. The older you get, the more you realize that he does this with everyone. The people who work with him and everyone else who know him all say the same thing. Whatever your dad says he is going to do, he does. You always know that he is going to do it.

One day, your dad takes you out for a walk and he tells you that he has to go away on a trip. He does not know how long he is going to be gone, but he is coming back. And this time, when he comes back, he will never leave again. And then he gives you a book. The

book is a diary. And your dad has written on every page. Many of them have pictures. You open the first page and you see a picture of you and your dad with your red balloon. On the second page is a picture of you and your dad eating ice cream at the ice cream stand. On the third page is a picture of you and your new hat. Every page is like this until the last one. The last page says, “wait for me. I will be back.” And there is a place on the page just waiting for a picture. That night he tucks you into bed and tells you that I will be gone when you wake up in the morning. Someday soon I will be back. I just don’t know when. But when you miss me, read this. Day after day, that child now looks down the street waiting for dad to come home. Other kids, who never knew that dad, do not understand and even ridicule. Some days, when the child is afraid that he will forget what his dad looks like, he opens the diary and remembers. And then, he always reads the last page, “Wait for me. I will be back.” And he does.

The Bible is the diary of God. It is full of promises of God and it is full of fulfillments of those promises. Over and over he has demonstrated that whatever he says, he does. Now, he is preparing his disciples for some major events that are going to take place in the near future. But, those events, as big as they were, were a preview of something even greater. Christ has told them what is going to happen. Now, he is seeking to impress them with the urgency of believing it. Believe my word because they will never fail. That is the big idea.

This text basically has two parts: Example and promise. It really leads in well to what Christ says next, but I am only addressing these few verses because of how much misunderstood they have been. There have been so many attempts to “decode” the example of the fig tree, that the big idea has often been overlooked, or even lost as a result, as I will explain. Let’s dig in.

I. **The Command and connection** (32-33)

In verse 32 Jesus commands his disciples to learn. He is saying to pay attention to what it is going on. He is on the Mt. of Olives, which is known for having a lot of fig trees. By the way, Parker McGoldrick is studying this semester in Jerusalem and we have been trying to figure out a way for him to make and send us a video of himself from the Mt. Olives so we can see where Christ and the disciples were when this entire conversation was taking place. But, there are fig trees there, and so it is obviously an easy illustration for Christ to use. Every year the branches become tender. Every year leaves appear. Every year, summer comes. Think about this. Learn this lesson. The signs of summer are making a promise that summer is coming and summer always come. Now, in verse 33 Christ makes the connection. When you see all these things taking place, just as the signs of summer always mean that summer is coming, so too, all these things mean that “he is near.” Alright, let’s unpack this.

When Jesus says, “so also” (beginning of v.33) he is connecting the lesson of the fig tree to what he really wants his disciples to grasp. In order for us to know what that is, there are two phrases we must understand. First, what does Jesus mean by “all these things.” The most obvious answer would be that Jesus is talking about the events of verses 15-26.

Jesus is NOT saying that when you hear of wars and rumors of wars and nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, famines, earthquakes, etc. that these are signs of his coming. I know that some have said this and this has given rise to a number of studies where some “prophecy specialists” claim to have conducted statistical analysis saying that there is an increased number of earthquakes or that there are more wars going on, and such things like this in an effort to prove that the return of Christ could be at any moment. The wars and rumors of wars do not make his return any more imminent. Jesus said that wars and rumors of wars, etc. “all must take place, but the end is not yet.” These signs are not the end; they are just the beginning of birth pains. These are the Braxton Hicks, not the full blown labor. Therefore, the “all these things” of v.33 is NOT referring to verses 3-14. Verses 3-14 are referring to what we can expect from this world between the time of the ascension of Christ and the time that immediately precedes his return to the earth. Jesus describes life in verses 3-14 as being difficult for the believer. The wind of the culture is in our face. This world is not a friend to grace. Expect opposition. Expect persecution. But don’t panic. However, when you see the abomination of desolation as spoken by Daniel, now is the time to panic. Now is the time to take aggressive action because you know that the destruction of Jerusalem is about to take place and you need to get out of Dodge. Pay attention to the signs so that you are not caught unprepared.

Here is what I believe that Christ is saying. He is preparing his disciples for the coming destruction of Jerusalem. (They asked about it at the beginning of the chapter.) But, he also uses the destruction of Jerusalem as a preview of the destruction that is going to come upon the world. THEREFORE, when you (the disciples) see “all these things” when you see these signs that I am talking about, then you know that the fall of Jerusalem is imminent. Well, that happened. Jerusalem fell. The signs appeared and were fulfilled. But since that event previewed a greater tribulation that is yet to come upon the world, we, like the disciples, are to pay attention. Because immediately after the tribulation of those days, as verse 29 says, Christ is returning.

The second phrase of v.33 is translated, “you know that he is near, at the very gates.” Grammatically, this phrase, “he is near” could be translated as either “he is near” or “it is near”. It is possible that Jesus meant “it is near” which would mean to the disciples that when they saw the signs of the fall of Jerusalem, that they would know that it is near. It is right at the door. I think that “it is near” is the best way to take this, because I do not think that Jesus is telling his disciples that when Jerusalem fell, that this meant that Christ was about to return. It also, in my view makes the most sense with the next verse. The command is to learn the lesson from the fig tree. The connection is clear. The presence of the signs means that the event is going to take place. Jesus then makes this promise.

II. **The Promise** (34)

When Jesus says, “This generation” he always refers to the people that he is actually speaking to. Let me give you some examples:

Matthew 11.16 – “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to their playmates.”

Matthew 12.41-42 – “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.... The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it...”

Matthew 23.36 – “Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”

Therefore, I believe that when Jesus is talking about “this generation” that he is talking about the generation of his disciples. He is telling them that the city of Jerusalem is going to be destroyed in their lifetime. “This generation” in v.34 must be the same as “this generation” in v.33. Which means that there is an immediate sense of imminence for them. For them, this is going to happen and you had better be ready. It happened! For us, what that event pointed to is also going to happen and we had better be ready.

Here is the reason why I went into all of that. There have been so many fanciful interpretations and predictions based upon this verse, that I fear that the big idea of what Christ is saying tends to get lost. Let me give you a couple of examples. A number of people have taken the illustration that Jesus used of the fig tree as a prophecy about Israel itself. Here is the argument. For 1,900 years, Israel ceased to exist as a nation. In 1948 Israel, once again, formally became a nation. So, the fig tree is now once again putting out its leaves. So, when you see these things (Israel becoming a nation) then you know that Christ is near. In fact, “this generation” (the generation that was alive at the restoration of Israel) will not pass away until all these things take place. Therefore, since a generation is thought of to be between 33 and 40 years, the return of Christ will be in 1988, meaning that the rapture and the 7-year tribulation period will begin in 1981. Some of you may remember the hype and borderline hysteria of those days. There were a series of movies made called, “The Thief in the Night” and all sorts of prophecy conferences, speakers, books, studies, etc. I told you a couple of months ago about a popular book that came out around then that was entitled, 88 reasons why Jesus is coming back in 1988. It wasn't so popular in 1989. Listen, when people go beyond the Scriptures and make statements that the Bible does not make, it ends up undermining the statements that the Bible does make.

I was a youth pastor for a number of years. One night I got a phone call from a distressed mother because her son had locked himself into his room. He had a knife and was threatening to kill himself. I went over to their house and the boy let me talk with him. He really did not want to kill himself, but he was desperate. He felt as if he did not matter at all to his parents. He had a number of younger siblings and they, it seemed took all of the limited time and attention his parents had. He was basically left to fend for himself. As I talked with and listened to his parents, they told me something that I have never forgotten. Years earlier, that church used to have one of those prophecy experts come and preach on the signs of the times and topics related to that. This prophecy guy used this passage and others as part of a formula whereby he made it very clear that he expected the rapture of the church to occur around 1981. He also told everyone that any child who was under the age of accountability would be taken up into heaven at the rapture by Christ and would not go through the tribulation period. This couple, were kind, trusting

and simple people. The man worked hard, but they could not afford too much. But, based on what this prophecy guy was saying, they figured that they could have several children, and the rapture would happen and everyone would be together, forever with Jesus. So, they started having children and they had a house-full. Now, I think large families are great, but in his case, he was not prepared to raise them and never planned to. After all, everyone was going to be raptured in a few years. But the older the kids got, the more they ate and the more he had to work. To his credit, he took on a second and I think, even a third job just in order to pay his bills. All of that led to a very stressful home. Now, I was able to help them, and help this boy and his dad, but I was angered by this prophecy expert's mishandling of the text for the sake of hype and sensation.

The hype of the prophecy conferences did not pan out. The breathless and secret mysteries that prophecy experts revealed did not happen. The result was that the church was so burnt out on prophecy that it turned away from talking about the future, to only talking about now. Prophecy conferences were no longer cool and attractional. So the church started preaching on topics that were cool and attractional. But, prophecy occupies a major portion of the Bible. And Jesus is talking prophetically here. So, we cannot ignore it.

There are two dangers to avoid: 1) Do not make predictions. Only say what the Scriptures actually say. For example, Ezekiel speaks of Gog, of the land of Magog (possibly ancient names of the land of Russia) as invading Israel in the last days and getting crushed. So, when I see that Russia, in recent days has entered the mess in the Middle East with airstrikes and cruise missiles, does that get my attention? Sure does! What do I think? I think Russia is a player in the game. Do I raise my eyebrows when I realize that Russia has not directly intervened in the Middle East like this since W.W.II? I sure do. Do I find it interesting that I have read reports of joint military exercise between Russia and China because China considers ISIS to be a threat that has to be dealt with? I find it very interesting. I also think that the end game is not Syria, but is Israel. Therefore, do I think that this is a big deal? I don't know! It could be. So, am I going to make some prediction on that? Not on your life. You see, Gog and Magog may not be a reference to Russia or just to Russia. Many think that Gog is the name of ruler from the 7th century B.C. who ruled in Asia Minor. Magog could also refer to Ukraine and Kazakhstan as well as Georgia or Armenia. In fact, Gog may be the name of a ruler from Magog that may be cryptic names for a nation that is yet to be identified. I honestly do not know. In Revelation 16, John speaks of the bowls of wrath that are poured on the earth and that one of those dries up the Euphrates River that makes a path for the kings of the east to gather in the Middle East for battle. So, yes, this stuff gets my attention. But, I watch. I pray. I stand on my tiptoes. I hope. But, I do not predict and I cut my grass.

So, the one danger to avoid is to make predictions, because we simply do not know. The other danger to avoid is to pretend that everything is going to go on as it always has. Life as we know it is going to radically change. It may not be in my lifetime, but it is going to happen. Just as life radically changed for the disciples, just like Jesus said it would, life is going to radically change for this world. There is an end and it is a glorious end. In fact, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."*

III. The Ultimate Promise (35)

The certainty of a promise is determined by the credibility and authority of the one who makes it. The Old Testament prophets would say, "Thus says the LORD." They were quoting God. They had no inherent authority. Jesus, however, does not have to quote anyone. He is God. And this statement, this promise is incredibly comforting even as it is on one level a bit unnerving. First, the unnerving part:

Heaven and earth will pass away. The universe as we know it, is going to change. It is going to go away. It is dying. It is deteriorating. It is groaning. This announcement on the part of Christ is a warning not to place all of our affection and hope in this world. It is passing away. Heaven itself is not going to stay the same. Heaven is going to come to the earth. Everything as we know it is going to change but God and his Word!

But, (in contrast to the transient nature and the expiration date on the heavens and earth), my words will not pass away. I love the personal expression that Christ gives here. "My words." This is another outright claim to deity and authority. Jesus never has to send out representatives to media outlets to "walk back" the conversation or spin his words because he said something off the cuff that was true. Everything that Jesus said was on purpose, and true. There was nothing that he should have said that he didn't say, nor anything that he shouldn't have said that he said. His words, every single one of them matters. His words will endure. His words are forever. His words will accomplish exactly what he intended them to do. Because he is God, and because he is good and he is great, everything that he promises is not only right, but it will happen. His word is settled in heaven forever. His word is truth.

Today, we, like that child, wait, but not for our dad, but for our King and our Savior to return. We have his diary and thousands of promises and reminders of how he has always done what he promised to do. We look, not down the street, but in the air. He's coming back. He promised. And even if everything around us collapses, his word will never fail. It simply cannot. The fact that this world is going to implode is not the entire story. Being a follower of Christ is not a last resort because you are afraid if you don't. Being a follower Christ means that you love Christ. It means that you finally come to grips with the fact that you are a rebel before God. Your sin condemns you. You feel guilty, because you are indeed guilty. And you realize that there is nothing that you can do to erase your condemnation or guilt but you also realize and accept and love the fact that Christ came to this earth to live in your place. He lived a perfect life because you could not. He died on the cross because he was credited with all of your sin and his death was offered up to His Father as a perfect sin-bearing, debt-paying, wrath-satisfying sacrifice in your place. Running from a dying world is not enough. Run to Jesus. Fearing the wrath that is to come is not enough. There is wrath that is coming. There are cataclysmic changes that are coming. Heaven and earth are going to pass away. But fearing the wrath is not the goal. Love Christ. Trust Christ. Believe Christ. Believe what he said, because what he said is what he did. And what he did for you is enough. His words (every single one of them of them) will never pass away. And when you long for him. Read His Word!