

First Advent, November 29, 2020      Mark 13:24-37      LFLC

Imagine that you are flying first class—you know, the front part of the plane  
where the hot tub, the pool table and the gourmet food are--  
not like back in economy where passengers  
are shoe-horned into their seats  
and as a reward for their compliance,  
get a small bag of pretzels and a little glass  
filled with coke or 7 Up or tomato juice.

Truly, life and time in economy is a different world.

Now, continue imagining that there, in the comfort of first class. . .  
that everything suddenly becomes silent—deathly silent—  
and you are struck by the fact that you are hearing nothing  
because the engines. . .on both wings of the plane. . .  
both engines have quit and the plane starts losing altitude.  
The nose drops, and it is followed by a swift,  
unwanted and unwelcome rapid descent.

Now, while I don't know this for sure,  
I suspect that not a single one of us would immediately think,  
“I wish had spent more time in the office  
or watching Netflix or updating my Facebook or Instagram postings.”

In truth, at that moment, in that deadly silence and that rapid descent,  
the world that you knew--the world you lived in and loved in--  
that world is coming. . .no, has come. . .to an end.

And regardless of whether the captain manages  
to regain control of the plane, restart the engines  
and return to a safe. . .and level. . .altitude,  
you will never be quite the same again because the world  
you thought you knew so well—that world is over.

Oh, if everything goes right and you get to go home again,  
and hug those you love, eat with those you care about the most. . .

and when and where checking your bank balance  
 doesn't bring on a feeling of anxiety, even dread--  
 even if all of that and more makes it "feel like"  
 everything is the same as it was before—  
 it isn't. . .and it won't be. . .and you know it.

And, unless your IQ is lower than linoleum, you will. . .  
 will have to. . .will need to. . .will be expected to. . .  
 make some changes to your life. . .to your new life in a new world.

I think that is something of what Jesus is saying and implying in today's gospel:  
 That the world we knew is on the cusp of coming to an end:  
 Whether it because of a global pandemic or global climate change;  
 or because of the threat of economic collapses  
 due to shuttered businesses or trade wars,  
 or massive governmental deficits;

or whether is because personal or family tragedies  
 like the death of a loved one  
 or the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness  
 or the loss of vision or mobility or memory—

whatever it is that is happening now or waiting in the wings to happen--  
 the future that we thought we knew—  
 the future we planned for so carefully and so responsibly--  
 that future has been turned upside down. . .  
 and the benign, safe, comfortable, affluent world  
 that we once took for granted. . .that we accepted as our right. . .is over.

And we all know that to be true. . .because the signs of the times  
 are telling us so: wearing masks everywhere,  
 maintaining distance from others who are threat to us,  
 daily news about upticks in cases, increasing hospitalizations,  
 the lack of ICU beds and the need for ventilators. . .  
 stressed out health care workers  
 and yet another new set of restrictions on our daily lives—

the signs of the times are announcing clearly  
 that the old world we once knew--  
 that "old normal" of 10 months ago--is over and gone forever.

And the result is that whether we are 35,000 feet in the air  
 or down here on good old *terra firma*,  
 we need to do something in response to that realization  
 and reading of the signs of the times.

Now, one possible response is, of course, to chug the champagne,  
 stock up on toilet tissue and paper towels, and only worry about #1.  
 That is, grab anything and everything in sight  
 and focus on safety, security, comfort. . .  
 on consumption and accumulation for me and mine. . .  
 and, literally, to hell with everybody else. . .while feeling just a tad guilty  
 about an attitude like that. . .but not overly-guilty.

But I'm guessing that's not exactly the response  
 Jesus is looking for, though, is it?  
 Instead, his advice. . .and our response. . .is to "wake up!"

Wake up and realize it is time to your life around—  
 which means to pay attention to what God is doing in your life. . .  
 because, whether you think of it as accidental or coincidental or providential,  
 God IS at work in your life. . .and at work in the world through your life.

I mean, you don't just happen to be here this morning,  
 whether physically or on zoom or at home on your couch  
 reading these words and/or seeing or hearing this message:

No matter where you were born or grew up,  
 no matter what or where and how your past unfolded--  
 the Spirit of God has brought to this place--  
 to this place and point in time. . .and in your soul--  
 where and when you can hear this word and warning:  
 "Your world is coming to an end. So what are you going to about it?"

But, we may say, why doesn't God "let us in on the secret of the future?  
 Why doesn't God let us know what is in store  
 for our world in general and for us in particular?"

Honestly now: Do you really want to know your personal future  
 or your family's future?  
 Would we really want know ahead of time  
 everything that could or would or will happen. . .  
 and when. . .and how. . .and why?

I mean, isn't life in this present world. . .at this present time. . .  
 isn't life now stressful enough? worrying enough?  
 hard enough to manage?  
 difficult or depressing enough to cope with? . . .  
 without the burden of knowing what the next day  
 or the next week or the next year will bring?

I had a young man in a previous congregation  
 whose father suffered from ALS—Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis—  
 known more commonly as "Lou Gehrig's Disease". . .  
 a neurological disorder that gradually and inexorably  
 destroys the body's nervous system,  
 and prevents first walking, then talking, then eating  
 and, finally, even breathing, until eventually it ends one's life.

And not only is it a dreadful disease, it is genetic. . .inherited—  
 but not by every family member. . .only by some.  
 And this young man who had just gotten married not long before,  
 was trying, with his new bride, to decide  
 whether or not they should have children.

Now it was possible for him take a very specialized test  
 and find out if he was a carrier of the disease. . .  
 and would eventually die of it. . .and even more,  
 if he would pass that gene on to any children they might have.

In the conversations and counselling sessions among the three of us,  
 I asked him if he intended to take the test and find out the results. . .  
 and, after a long silence and after looking at his wife,  
 his answer was finally “No! I don’t what to know  
 what the future holds for me. . .or for any children we might have. . .  
 because knowing that it was waiting for me in my future. . .  
 and knowing that I could or would pass it on—  
 knowing that would rob my life, and our lives together,  
 of any bit of joy or hope now.  
 So, I would rather just live in the present. . .  
 and live fully, gladly and gratefully now.”

I didn’t then and still don’t know now whether or not  
 he was being responsible in refusing to take the test  
 and remaining ignorant of what might happen.  
 And I didn’t then and still don’t know now  
 whether his choice was “appropriate” or “right”-  
 at least in the judgement of others who weren’t or aren’t  
 in that same situation. . .or who maybe are but don’t know that yet.

And I didn’t know whether I would do or feel the same  
 about whether the Alzheimer’s disease that both of my parents  
 died with (not died “from” but died “with”)—  
 whether that reality is in the cards for me in the next decade or so  
 and whether it would or should change the way I live now.

So, maybe, maybe, reading between the lines in this morning’s Gospel,  
 Jesus is implying that God is gracious in being silent  
 about the future. . .about our futures. . .in order to protect us—  
 to set us free from worry and anxiety over trying to control it  
 or manage it or prevent it or change it or give up hope in it.

Perhaps God’s silence about our future—allows us. . .even compels us. . .  
 to trust God for the future, to trust God with the future. . .  
 and to wait for God’s future. . .in hope and in wonder—  
 at what new thing God is about to do now.

At the same time, while we wait for that future to “break in on us”,  
 Jesus telling us that there are things we can do. . .now. . .  
 beyond just “sitting on our hands passively”.

As I said earlier, the first thing to do is to “Wake up!”--  
 that is, to pay attention to who we are  
 and what we have become as a result of what God  
 has given us and done with us and to us.

The talents you and I were born with; the wisdom, skill and insights  
 we have gained through our experiences in life—  
 all of that. . .and all of them. . .become the tools  
 we can put at God’s service in doing God’s work in this world—  
 the work of God’s kingdom. . .which is to care for  
 the little, the last, the least and the lost,  
 the meek and the mourning, the lonely and the wounded—

to be present with all who hunger for hope and joy,  
 for peace and forgiveness. . .and to welcome and embrace  
 all who long for a place to call home. . .  
 for a community where they can and do belong.

The second thing we can do is to understand his implication  
 that we are not to be afraid—to not be afraid because  
 the ending of the old marks the beginning of something new.  
 Through the blood, sweat and tears of a painful delivery,  
 a child is born. . .a new life makes its entrance  
 and, for the parents and the child, a whole new world begins.

In the same way, by the destruction of a world of me-centred living and thinking,  
 a new world. . .a new kingdom. . .a new reign. . .  
 is created and brought into being—  
 and we are called to trust God—  
 to trust that God is with us and for us, now and in the future—  
 however that future might unfold and whatever that future will hold.

Trusting God with the future is a little like being able to see with our hearts  
 something that is impossible to see with our eyes. . .  
 like looking at an acorn and trying to comprehend  
 how that little nut-of-a-thing can and will become  
 a massive and towering oak tree that can hold  
 a ton of snow in its crown in the winter,  
 shelter dozens of birds and nests and fledglings in its branches  
 while providing summer shade to children and parents  
 who sit underneath it drinking iced tea or lemonade.

Could anyone imagine such thing  
 just by looking at an acorn lying on the ground?

Or trusting God with the future is like remembering  
 the old Greek story about the Phoenix—the mythical bird  
 that dies in fire and is re-created out of its own ashes .

In the same way, the end of this world contains the seeds of a new one—  
 just as this table up here this morning which holds the signs of death—  
 a body broken and blood shed—signs of death  
 which become the means of life:  
 Christ's life in us. . .Christ's love for us. . .Christ's presence with us. . .  
 and the promise of Christ's reign among us.

So, yes, my friends and fellow travelers,  
 the world is coming an end. . .right here. . .right now. . .this morning. . .  
 and, my Lord, what a morning it is when the stars begin to fall!

Amen.      SDG