



Living with Realism and Hope in our Time

Matthew 24:1-14

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
January 6, 2019

As this is the first worship service of 2019, this sermon is a New Year's sermon. We are going to think about moving into a new year in the light of a passage that gives us a biblical perspective on life as we begin a new year. I have given this sermon the title, *Living with Realism and Hope in our Time*. That title sums up Jesus' purpose in this whole chapter and in the parts that we are going to look at more particularly. It sums up the purpose of all of this kind of literature in the Bible, which is known as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature in the Bible contain predictions of the future from the perspective of the time during which they were written, and it ordinarily teaches that it will be difficult for God's people, but that in spite of the difficulties there is hope because of God and his care for his people and the goal that he is working toward to bring evil to an end and his kingdom to its consummation.

The book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature. It has been said that the theme of that book is simply "Jesus wins." That is really the theme of all of this kind of literature in the Bible. "Jesus wins." But another part of its message is that God's people often suffer during the time before Jesus returns to bring history to its conclusion. And so my title, the title of this sermon: "*Living with Realism and Hope in our Time.*"

As we survey the way that things are going in our society, there is a lot that is troubling and disconcerting. We are living in a time of rapid cultural change and from the perspective of biblical truth and values much of that change is not for the better. The church is smaller than it used to be. Its influence is less than it used to be. Many of the values that are prominent in the world around us run counter to biblical

values. One of the characteristics of our time is that continuing to hold to the biblical world-view and passing on to our children is very difficult.

That is not just my observation, that is an observation of some of the most insightful and penetrating observers of our cultural moment. Furthermore, we seem to be seeing the beginning of a kind of persecution that may prove to be costly and difficult for us in the coming years. We are at a point where true Christianity is considered to be dangerous and harmful to the common good because it does not conform to some of the most cherished religious commitments of our secular society – particularly in the realm of human sexuality and gender. For some time now, the Christian view of the legitimate expression of sexuality has been considered to be unhealthy and oppressive, but now it is considered by many to be dangerous and harmful. And so we are told that it is hateful to teach that any sexual expression outside of the marriage between a biological man and a biological woman is wrong and unless repented of will land you in hell.

Looking at our time and our immediate future with realism requires that we face the fact that we and our teaching are increasingly considered dangerous and unacceptable and that it is in the common good to suppress it. But the Bible will not allow realism to become pessimism because none of this is surprising from a biblical perspective and the Bible continues to insist that Jesus sits on the throne, that he was won the victory over sin and evil and that in the end every tongue will acknowledge his lordship and every knee shall bow to him whether they want to or not. That is the real dangerous teaching of Christianity as far as the unbelieving world is concerned even though they do not fear it. It is interesting that the world considers the biblical teaching on human sexuality to be dangerous, but it is not concerned about the Christian teaching that every single person in the world who has not believed in Jesus and submitted to his lordship will one day be forced to submit and be sent away to eternal punishment.

Anyway, we begin a new year in this kind of environment and the word of the Lord to us as we face 2019 is, “be realistic but live with hope.”

So Jesus is walking with his disciples and they are asking him about the end-times. Jesus had just told them that the temple was going to be

destroyed and that not one stone would be left upon another and they ask him, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" In reply, Jesus tells them what conditions will be like for them in the period between their time and the end of the age.

Verses 4-12 paint the picture. Matthew 24:4–12, "4And Jesus answered them, "See that no one leads you astray. 5For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. 6And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. 8All these are but the beginning of the birth pains. 9"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. 10And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. 11And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. 12And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold."

He is talking about their future, but for us his words apply to our past, our present and our future. They apply to different places in different ways and at different times. These things have happened throughout the history since Jesus. They are happening in various places in different ways in the present. And we can expect that to be the same for the future until the Lord returns.

False christs, leading many astray. Wars and rumors of wars. Nation fighting against nation and kingdom against kingdom. Famines. Earthquakes. "They will deliver us up to tribulation and put you to death... You will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.... Many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.... Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.... Lawlessness will be increased.... The love of many will grow cold." That is what we can expect in 2019 in one way or other and in some place or other. Some of our brothers and sisters are getting the full-on persecution. Some are living in the middle of wars. Some are experiencing famine and the aftereffects of earthquakes. We are living in an environment in which many are falling away, in which false prophets are leading many astray,

in which lawlessness is increased, in which the love of many has grown cold. That is what we can expect in 2019 and we can expect the trends to continue or veer off in a different direction or perhaps the Lord will bring revival or perhaps he will return.

But we are living in an environment that is hostile to the Christian faith in its own way and barring any surprising moves by the Lord, we can expect more of the same and likely an increase in hostility against us.

Jesus says that many will fall away. That is certainly what we are seeing in our time. This has been a characteristic of the culture in the western world in the last number of centuries. It is not that there was ever a golden age for the church in history. Even in times when there were more Christians and when Christianity exerted more influence, an awful lot of it was very superficial – many people were Christians in name only – there is always a lot of hypocrisy in the church. The Bible does not encourage us to look with longing and nostalgia to the past because the present is the time in which we are called to live and serve the Lord and because the Bible is always pointing us to the future as the source of our hope and inspiration. Even in times that are described in the Bible, the people of God were always deeply flawed and far from ideal.

But one of the things that is being said by keen observers of our time is that it is a time when many are falling away from the faith. It is a time when many who claim to be Christians are profoundly influenced by the world and its thinking and it is a time when many of the children of believers do not continue living and confessing and believing the faith of their parents. Even though the recent past couple of centuries was not a golden age from a Christian perspective, it was, in the west, an environment in which there was support from the culture at large for belief in God and the truthfulness of the Bible. It was the norm for people to believe that God existed and that there was a supernatural world beyond our sense-perception and that the biblical teaching on morality and the final judgment were truth. There was support for faith simply because most people believed the main lines of the teaching of the Bible even if they did not always live according to it.

That is no longer the case. In that sense we live in a very different world from the west before the 1950s. The shaping influence of our society is

away from the biblical faith. The number of people who accept the Bible as the word of God is relatively small and the number of people who truly believe it and live by it is smaller yet. Many who confess to be Christians in some sense accept the main outlines of the worldly way of thinking about life and right and wrong and God and his relationship to us. A famous study done some years ago by a scholar named Christian Smith found that most young people claiming to be Christians believe that the purpose of life is about being as happy as possible in this life. They believe that if things were going well for them God was pretty much irrelevant to how they lived their lives. And whatever relationship they did have with God consisted of asking him to give him the things that would make them happy.

The fact is that we are living in a time when many have fallen away, and many are falling away. Our time is not totally unique in this way compared to other times in history, but it is a characteristic of our time and it is this time in which we are called to live. And biblical realism requires that we understand that the way of thinking about life and reality that permeates the environment in which we are living, is one that presents many challenges to our faith and to the process of passing on our faith to our children and grandchildren.

The world in which we live is not the worst it has ever been, but we are living in a time which powerfully challenges our faith and in which the shaping influence of our culture is towards unbelief. Most of what we and our children hear and see from our culture catechizes us towards unbelief. Pretty much everything that we see and hear in the media catechizes us toward thinking in terms of this life only. The advertising that we are exposed to is a powerful value-shaping apparatus and the message is, live your best life now. The ads tell us how to be a happy and fulfilled and the ubiquitous message is that real life is this life and true happiness and fulfillment is found in your image or your car or having lots of money or going on that dream vacation. You may think that that is so obvious that it is not a danger, but businesses do not spend billions of dollars on something that does not work. It works very well. And it influences us in profound ways and the direction of that influence is towards seeking our treasures in the here and now and apart from God.

And then there is persecution. Jesus says a lot about the persecution of his people in this passage. “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name sake.” In many parts of the world persecution means prison camps and execution and torture and real hardship economically and physically.

There is a beginning of that in our society. We see the trends. We hear stories in which the law is being used to marginalize Christians and their beliefs and we are beginning to hear language claiming that Christian institutions such as schools are breaking the law by refusing to hire practicing homosexuals and transgender people. Insisting on the biblical teaching that homosexual practice is a sin and that homosexual desires are wrong and must be controlled and that those who struggle with gender confusion should be lovingly helped to embrace their God-given gender – these convictions are considered to be hateful and harmful and if the trends continue, it will become costly to maintain the biblical stance on these matters and insisting on ordering our churches and schools and families by biblical norms.

This is also part of the realism as we look into our future. We do not know what the future will bring. But we do know the trends of the past and present and if they continue, it could be increasingly difficult for us if we refuse to conform to the expectations of our society on these matters. These expectations are fast becoming demands and it is likely that we will see an increase in persecution of those who insist on biblical morality.

Verse 13 speaks powerfully to our situation. Jesus says, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” This was true for the generation that first heard it. It has been true for every generation since. And it is true for us. To be saved in the end requires endurance. The word “endurance” indicates that following Jesus is hard and that “keeping on” following Jesus requires persevering against opposition. The things that Jesus predicts are all difficulties and the two kinds of difficulty that are top of mind in our time and place are the pervasive influence of the world and the opposition from the world to the Christian faith and increasingly to Christians.

Applying Jesus' words to us, as we consider 2019 and beyond, we must say that faithfulness to Jesus will require endurance. It will take deliberate effort. Just coasting and going with the flow will not do. Jesus has made it clear that there is a cost associated with following him and that is becoming increasingly apparent as the cost of following Jesus increases the more opposed the world grows to the Christian message.

Jesus is saying that if you are going to be saved in the end, you will need to take your walk with him seriously and you will have to be engaged in fighting the fight of faith and persisting in that effort until the end of your' days.

And so the word of God requires that we ask ourselves whether "endurance" is a word that describes our life with God. Are we enduring in the struggle or are we drifting with the current of our times? That has always been a searching question for Christians, but it is searching for us in a time when the influences of the world are particularly pervasive and subtle because of the various forms of technology which surround us with the values and the assumptions of the world.

The fact is that many Christians have succumbed to the pressure from the world. The fact is that the Church is a lot smaller than it used to be and that means that along the way there have been many who have left the faith and there have been many young people raised in Christian homes who have chosen not to follow Jesus and to live for this world. Jesus' words speak powerfully to us in our environment – "But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

The application for us as we face a new year is, "Do not be complacent. Do not take it for granted that you are not being pulled into the current of worldly thinking and worldly living. Think very seriously about your life and values and priorities in the light of biblical teaching." One of the common themes of the best Christian literature on this subject is that the only Christians who will survive in the current environment are those who go deep – that is those who are serious about their relationship with the Lord and who are serious about the spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer, and those who are serious about not being conformed to the world, and those who are serious about

making the sacrifices that are required for living lives of service and love. The rest will be swept away in the current of worldly values and priorities.

Well what about the encouragement. There are lots of things one could say, but I will stick to this passage. The first is that this passage shows that this is the normal environment for Christians to live their lives. In thinking about the times in which we live, we must avoid two errors. On the one hand we should not neglect the ways in which our time and place are a tremendously hostile environment for the Christian faith. In some ways the temptations and pressures we face are unique in the history of the world. And whether or not our time is unique, it is the time in which we are living, and it has its challenges. The other error is thinking that it is completely unique. Jesus' warnings in this passage make it clear that Christians have always had to live in a hostile environment.

And that is an encouragement, because this is Christianity 101. It is really the nature of the Christian faith in the time between the first and second comings of Christ that it is lived in an environment that is toxic to it. It is the nature of the Christian life as the New Testament describes it that it is a struggle – that there is the danger of being drawn into the world – that many do fall away.

That is what Jesus is saying here in our text and that is an encouragement because it means that the resources of the gospel are such that they can and do sustain the followers of Jesus in a hostile environment. It is the norm for the Christian life to be lived in a hostile environment and the gospel is designed to function in a war zone. This is the nature of the Christian life as the New Testament describes it. And there have always been Christians who thrived in the face of the temptations of the world and the hostility of the world. The church has made its way through time and it has always been in the context of danger and opposition. And we know that that has happened because Jesus has promised that he would build his church and the gates of hades would not prevail against it.

A second encouragement from this passage is Jesus' express instruction that his disciples should not be alarmed. In verse 5 Jesus says, "See that

you are not alarmed.” And the reason that the disciples are not to be alarmed is “For this must take place....” Whenever the word “must” is used in this way, it is referring to the sovereign plan of God. All of the things that Jesus is describing in these verses must take place because they are all part of God’s plan. They are all part of God’s providential plan for the world and for his people in it.

Things are not out of control. The devil is not winning the battle. The people of God are not at the mercy of forces that are outside of God’s sovereign purposes. All of these things must be. This is God’s plan for his world. This is God’s plan for his glory. This is God’s plan for the good and wellbeing of his people. The Bible makes it clear that God works everything together for the good of his church, for the glory of his name, and for the spiritual growth of his people. None of it is random. The way the world is right now is that way because of God’s plan. The environment in which we live out our Christian lives, is the exact environment that God has selected for us to live in. It is a result of his love for us and it is the environment that he has chosen for us and in which he is calling us to be his witnesses. And Jesus himself says to us, “See that you are not alarmed....”

Be “not alarmed” does not mean be careless and unconcerned. The point of the whole passage is that we be alert and engaged and ready to deal with difficulties and temptations. But we are not to be alarmed. And the reason is Jesus. Jesus’ disciples are not to be alarmed because they are Jesus’ disciples. Jesus is a special Lord and master. There are all kinds of lords and masters in the world, but none of them is like Jesus. Even if we restrict ourselves to this passage, Jesus is telling the future. No one else can tell the future. Those who try get it wrong more often than they get it right. Jesus is telling the future as the Lord of the future. Jesus knows the future because he controls the future. And so Jesus himself is the reason that the disciples are to live in a hostile and tumultuous world without being alarmed.

A third encouragement from this passage is the last verse of the section that we are focusing on, verse 14, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

The gospel is “good news.” It is the good news in a dark and troubled and dangerous world. It is the good news of forgiveness of sins, of reconciliation with God, of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, of adoption by God for believers, of the victory that Jesus has won over sin and death and the devil. The gospel is the good news of the kingdom – that God’s kingdom will come, and his will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Paul expresses the good news in the context of a hostile environment when he writes in Romans 8:38-39, “³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus says that “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world.” That assumes the there will always be a church to proclaim it and that God still has his elect to gather out of the world. The fact that the gospel will be proclaimed throughout the world means that God is still on track with his plan of salvation. He has not given up on the world. There are still people from the world who need to be saved. There is still a task and a purpose for the followers of Jesus. And that will be the case until the end.

“Then the end will come.” That is a huge part of the encouragement that the Bible gives for Christians living in a hostile environment. It is essential to biblical Christianity that this world is not our home. It is essential to biblical Christianity that our treasure is in heaven and not on this earth. And so the ultimate encouragement is not based on anything in this life, but it is focused on the end and what lies beyond the end.

This message of this passage is not that you can expect an easy and a comfortable life in 2019. That is never the message of the Bible. Sometimes God gives it, but he does not promise it. This passage and the Bible in general, make it clear that it will be difficult for Christians in this life in one way or another and its message consistently is that our hope and security and encouragement is in our relationship with God through Christ and in the future that he has in store for us. And so let us head into 2019 with the attitude of the faithful of all the generations

who understood that “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”