

“Living with a Sense of Urgency and Trust”
Daniel 12:1–3; Hebrews 10:11–14, 19–25; Mark 13:1–8
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
November 14, 2021

Athletic coaches often talk about playing with a sense of urgency. Games are won not simply with skilled players and good strategy but with a strong sense of urgency and a willingness to play with passion, as if it really matters. The irony is it doesn't really matter. They're all games. Some people make a lot of money playing, coaching and managing them, and I personally love sports, but the outcomes don't really contribute much to the world other than a little entertainment, a bit of character development, and enabling a tiny percentage of people from impoverished backgrounds to live a better life. But even this latter reality creates its own problems in the way of unrealistic expectations.

Yet, while sports don't really matter, some things do, and this concept of urgency applies to them. The faithful in each of the texts we have read today live with a sense of urgency. They all experience suffering and persecution, and as a result, matters of faith are not simply a pious kind of window dressing, they are the means by which they live.

The book of Daniel is set during the oppressive reign of Antiochus IV, Epiphanes, as he was known, king of the Seleucid Empire from 175 to 164 BCE. This oppression led to the Maccabean revolt and the purification and rededication of the temple in Jerusalem which is still celebrated through Hanukkah. When the author speaks of a time of anguish to be followed by deliverance, he is talking about what the people live and breathe, what keeps them up at night and what they hope for. They suffer mightily, but they believe God will intervene dramatically on their behalf, and this belief is what keeps them going.

The book of Hebrews is also addressed to people living under persecution, Roman persecution, because of their faith. They are encouraged to draw near to God in worship, trusting in God's acceptance made possible through Christ, and to draw near to each other, provoking one another to love

and good deeds. But then, the author adds that they should all be about these habits of faith “all the more” — that is, urgently — as they see the Day approaching. This refers to their belief in Christ’s imminent return (Hebrews 9:28). As with the ancient Jewish people, these Christians suffer yet also trust in God’s deliverance from suffering. This trust motivates an urgent approach to faith.

In the reading from Mark, the disciples are admiring the majesty of the temple, as we might admire this sacred space, but Jesus says buildings come and go, and this building will be destroyed in short order. He is the bluebird of happiness... Scholars debate whether Jesus envisions the destruction of the temple in 70 CE or perhaps Mark, writing just after that time, puts these words on his lips, but either way, the text describes a definitive consequence of oppression and rebellion.

The disciples view his statement to be apocalyptic, which it is, but he cautions them not to be misled. There will be many signs that people will interpret as harbingers of the end, but no one knows when it will take place, and he is the end. The focus is not on earthquakes, wars, and other signs; it is on Jesus. Their calling is to be faithful to him.

In every context, there is a keen sense of urgency. People face life and death realities, often because of their faith, and it is their faith that must see them through. Faith is not a casual endeavor or life-improvement option like exercise or diet. It is not something they can take or leave without much thought. It is the air they breathe!

How radically different is the context in which we have spent most our lives! There are people in other parts of the world who have faced great challenges, but most Americans in recent history have lived comfortably, and thus faith is an interesting extra to consider, an option to take or leave, and in recent years, many are choosing to leave.

I remember the first Sunday after 9-11. Our church in Winston-Salem was packed, over 800 people. Right after a national assault with religious overtones, and the unknown of what might be yet to come, people were really interested in religion, their own and the faith of others. There was an urgency about faith, but it didn’t last. After a few weeks, when nothing else happened, we returned to the status quo. Whether to engage in habits of faith was a

minimal concern again, akin to deciding whether we want to eat out tonight, and if so, where.

And to be clear, by habits of faith, I don't just mean coming to church for worship or study. I mean everything that goes with it — daily habits of devotion, service to people in need, thinking about ways we can connect the good news with brokenness of the world. These are all good things to do, when we have time, when we feel like it. But we don't live like our very existence depends on these things.

Perhaps that is beginning to change. The church is entering an urgent time. We cannot simply maintain the status quo if we want there to be a church in fifty, perhaps even twenty-five, years. But there is opportunity in this moment, dare we say *kairos* moment, because while the established church of our American past was the center of community life in many ways, it wasn't always wholly about the kingdom or realm of God. It was self-serving and self-interested as opposed to having a sacrificial concern for the world around it, like Jesus. Perhaps we can reclaim the true character of church, and perhaps, if we do, many people who have given up on the old institution will find the new realm of Christ attractive.

But it's not just the church that is entering an urgent time. We are entering an urgent time. To use a phrase from another era, everything nailed down seems to be coming loose, and thus we are forced to ask ultimate questions a bit more urgently. Our two-party system of government is falling apart, the nature of truth has come into question, the value of science is doubted, the hopefulness of modernity is giving way to the skepticism of postmodernity as we are no longer confident that we can solve the problems of the world — like tensions in the Holy Land or the unrest in Afghanistan — the earth on which we depend is being ravaged by climate change, whether we believe it is real or not, and that doesn't matter. As our belief about COVID-19 doesn't affect our experience if we contract the virus, the damage to our planet is happening no matter what our political or ideological views are.

Taking all of this into account and more — like new perspectives on sexuality and other faiths — we may be tempted to assume an apocalyptic perspective like some of the faithful before us. From a prophetic view, with God's help, we can work to move the world toward a more just and peaceful place. From an apocalyptic view, it is a lost cause. The world is going to

you-know-where in a you-know-what. The only solution is for God to intervene dramatically and set things right.

Tempting as it may be to embrace this latter view, I want to suggest that we embrace the sense of urgency of former believers we have read about in today's texts without embracing this apocalyptic perspective. As Dan Day pointed out a few Wednesday nights ago, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus calls us to pray for God's kingdom to come, God's will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Even though he sometimes seems to assume an apocalyptic perspective, Jesus lives with and recommends to us prophetic hope. There would be no need to pray for God's kingdom of justice and love, righteousness and peace, to come on earth as it is in heaven if this wasn't even a possibility. Jesus calls us to pray for God's realm and then to help bring it into being.

This requires a sense of urgency, the realization that things are not as they should be in this world and thus, we have a responsibility to do what we can to help. Since there is still racial injustice, what are we doing to make a difference? We have participated in book studies and virtual dialogues, we have stood with and at times joined protesters, we have tried to grow in our understanding and capacity for empathy, and many of us have tried to do the right thing in our everyday lives – in our workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. But is it enough? Are we doing all we can? Is this the urgent, pressing matter it should be?

Consider the topics we have heard about from community leaders as a part of the process facilitated by the dream team — affordable housing, mental healthcare, tutoring and mentoring, equal access to healthcare and all levels of education, how we view and relate to people from different walks of life. Most of us would readily agree that these are all vital concerns and that Jesus calls us to address these needs of God's beloved children right around us, the Gospel compels us to do so. And this is what our whole process is about — enabling us to connect our heritage and current gifts with human need. But what is our level of urgency? It seems to be pretty high and it is growing. It will need to be for the sake of people around us and the future of the church.

For this is what the future of the church depends on — our willingness to focus less on ourselves and more on others. If we talk with people who

have no interest in the church, especially younger people, we hear something like this. At worst, church is a gathering of people with backward and oppressive ideas. At best, it is a self-centered group who want others to come do their thing with them. This image is not unfounded. What we do here matters, community matters, people need community, and it is the Jesus story we learn about here that sends us into the world with love. But do we get there enough, with a sense of urgency? That is the key to our future — not a 1950s visitation and outreach strategy, but a 2020s commitment to service and community.

We might begin by recognizing a personal connection to an issue that has been named by our community panelists. Many may not apply to us, but some do. Perhaps someone we love has struggled with mental health and both the stigmas and challenges associated with receiving care. Perhaps someone we care about can't afford a decent place to live. Perhaps a child we know from a family with very little just can't get a break. Perhaps racial injustice or heterosexism is not just an important social topic to consider, it is a daily burden for someone we love.

A member of this church was handcuffed because he used a twenty-dollar bill and that was deemed to be too much money for a dark-skinned man. A man in our family took his own life some years ago largely because he was emotionally abused all his life for being gay. When the issue hits close to home, when it is our loved one or friend, it matters! We have a sense of urgency! But every social issue is personal. Every need around us involves someone's son or daughter. We need the same level of urgency as if it were our personal concern.

The good news is it is not all up to us. While people in every text we have read have a sense of urgency, they also trust in God to provide help. God will deliver the Israelites from persecution, Christ will return to establish a reign of justice and love, God can be trusted with the future. What the people are called to do is participate in God's new creation, to do their part in seeing that the kingdom comes on earth. That is our calling, and it requires urgency and trust.