

**Joy of Every Longing Heart:  
The Lesson of the Fig Tree**  
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

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They called it The Great Disappointment of 1844. They say that some people were so disappointed that they wept for days and days.

Here's what happened. A man named William Miller became a Christian. Some of his friends didn't understand his conversion. In order to explain his faith, he began a very careful study of the Bible. He started with Genesis 1:1 and was meticulous in his study, scrutinizing every passage. He wouldn't move to the next verse until he felt certain that he understood the meaning of the one he was studying. He went through the entire Bible like that, carefully studying all the way. When he finished with the book of Revelation, he was convinced that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. He predicted that Christ would return, history would end, and the Judgment would occur "on or before 1843."

He began to lecture and write about his discovery. With the help of a publisher, his ideas swept the nation. Those who believed his predictions were called Millerites and numbered as many as 500,000. Miller himself never set an exact date for the Second Coming, though some of his followers did. Miller said that it would occur some time between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. So you can imagine the electrifying atmosphere when the year 1843 arrived. Then March arrived. Then the 21<sup>st</sup>. With each passing month, the Millerites became more and more intoxicated by their anticipation of the Second Coming. But the date came and went and nothing happened. Miller went back to his work and discovered that he had made an error. One of his followers set a new date: October 22, 1844.

The Millerites again were in a frenzy. But once again the day came and went, and no Second Coming. It was dubbed The Great Disappointment of 1844. One of his followers wrote, "I waited all Tuesday [October 22] and dear Jesus did not come; I waited all the forenoon of Wednesday, and was well in body as I ever was, but after 12 o'clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural

strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay prostrate for 2 days without any pain – sick with disappointment.” (Quoted in George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World*, Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1993, 217-218.)

William Miller died a few years later. His followers pressed on and eventually formed a Christian denomination. Today we call them the Seventh Day Adventists.

The word advent means “coming or arrival.” Today is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the Christian year and the beginning of the liturgical season of Advent. We remember the coming of Jesus as an infant in Bethlehem, the wonderful stories of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and wise men. And we pray and hope that the spirit and life of Jesus will come again to each of us, reminding us of our baptisms and renewing our faith.

Our text for Advent Sunday from the Gospel of Mark surely figured prominently in the thinking of the Millerites. Mark 13 is an apocalyptic text attributed to Jesus. He predicts the cataclysm associated with the end of time. A desolating sacrilege will occur, he said. It will be a time of great tribulation. False Christs and false prophets will rise. Then one day the sun will turn dark. The moon will not shine. Stars will fall from the sky. We will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory, and he will gather his elect from the four corners of the earth.

That’s what the Millerites expected in 1844. And that’s why they were so disappointed when it didn’t happen.

The Millerites and others who have done the same thing failed to heed the lesson of the fig tree. Jesus ended Mark 13 by giving them a lesson drawn from agriculture and telling them to keep alert. He told them to watch the fig tree. When its buds begin to swell, that is a sign that summer is nearing. When they saw the tender new growth and the leaves beginning to emerge, they knew that summer was drawing near. So it is with the end of time, Jesus said. You must keep alert, he emphasized. Four times he told them to keep alert or to watch. And he also said this, something William Miller and all those who predict the end of time try to tend to ignore: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” The Second Coming is the Father’s business, not ours. Instead of trying to calculate when it’s going to occur, Jesus told his

disciples to keep alert. That's our business, and that's the lesson of the fig tree.

On this Advent Sunday, as our focus shifts toward Christmas and the first coming of Jesus as an infant, the lesson to keep alert still falls upon the followers of Jesus. So what does that mean? What does it mean for you and me to keep alert? It is not idle standing around and looking at fig trees. It's not counting stars or looking up biblical prophecy. To keep alert requires that we be actively engaged in those things that are in reality our business. Let me offer a few suggestions.

**First, if you really want to keep alert, take care of our business, love your loved ones.** Part of the lesson of the fig tree is that life is going to end one day for each of us. Either by our death or the Second Coming, our lives will end. So we must use the time we have effectively and love the ones we love.

I've told you a little through the years about my first church. It was a wonderful little country church down in Etowah County. I haven't told you about the Brasher brothers, though. That's not their real name, but this is a true story. The Brasher brothers—there were four of them—grew up in this little rural community. When I was there they were in their 60s and 70s. I learned that there had been a dispute among the brothers many years earlier. And they quit speaking to each other. They all lived in this small community. Two of them literally lived across the street from each other. They likely saw each other every day. But they hadn't spoken a word to each other in years. I suspect they've all died now. I wish I could tell you that reconciliation occurred before they died, but to my knowledge it didn't.

Loving the ones you love sometimes takes work. Reconciliation, forgiveness, overcoming pride and anger—that's hard work. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise. It's hard work, but it is worth the effort to be reengaged people you love. And that's part of what it means to be alert, ready, prepared.

Some of you may have some hard work to do to love the ones you love. It may be an adult son or daughter who has made poor choices? I would tell you simply this: you don't have to love what they've done to love them. Maybe it's a parent. Or your spouse. Or a friend. That's our business. We can prepare for the advent of Jesus by loving our loved ones.

**A second thing we can do to keep alert, take care of our business, is to serve someone in need.** I've spent my adult life studying and preaching the message of Jesus. I've concluded that his message originally was not something to be preached. It was something to be lived. He intended his followers to be engaged in the pain and struggle of people around them, as he was. Again the lesson of the fig tree is that life will end. We can use the time we have effectively by serving someone in need.

I've heard some of you speak about how rewarding it is to be a tutor at one of our local schools. We've got members tutoring at Lincoln Elementary and Stone Middle schools. From what I've heard some of you say, tutoring is only partly about math and reading. It's also about relationships, connecting with a young person who needs an adult in his or her life. I also see how meaningful the work at Lincoln Village is every time I drive through there. It's amazing what's happened down there. Literally it is a transformed neighborhood. Some of you have invested a lot of your self in that work. I could say similar things about your work with internationals, respite care, work with our own children and youth, or singing in our choir.

And I know that not all your service is done through the programming of this church. You may care for someone in your family or neighborhood. It may be someone where you work. Where you do it and how you do it are unimportant. What is important is that we live a lifestyle of service to others. That's our business. We can prepare for the advent of Jesus by serving someone in need.

**This last suggestion may be the most important of all. If we will love the ones we love and serve people in need, then we trust God for all the rest.** That's God's business. We don't have to calculate dates and times. The desolating sacrilege. The great tribulation. The darkening of the sun and moon. Stars falling from the sky. Jesus said that that's all God's business, not ours. Our business is to keep alert. And we can do that by loving our loved ones and serving others. Then we can trust that God will take care of everything else.

It's Advent Sunday. A day of beginnings. Let us pray and hope that the spirit and life of Jesus will come again to each of us, reminding us of our baptisms and renewing our faith.

## Closing Prayer

Blessed Lord, look within each of us. You see what we need. Come,  
O come, Emmanuel. Amen.