



*Who's In Charge, Anyway?*

*Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37*

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First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

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Wow, it's a wild and crazy world! Last week North Korea launched an ICBM that can travel some 8000 with a trajectory higher than that of the space station orbiting the earth. It has a range that can touch any city in the United States. Hawaii started having air raid drills again for the first time since the ICBM treaty was signed during the Nixon Presidential Administration.

In our own city there have been eleven murders; that's one a month. That number is not counting the murders in our surrounding counties of Tazewell and Woodford. In our oldest mall, the newest business has had two police interventions during their first week of business. People who live on the other side of the river who were afraid to come to Peoria have had their fears reinforced! For the record, Sue and I went to the mall last weekend and didn't have any trouble.

If you have children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren born after September, 2001 they have never known a time when America has not been at war in Iraq or Afghanistan. We have fought the war "off the books" at a deficit of some \$4.8 trillion. If not one more dollar is spent the interest due on the current debt will increase the debt to \$8 trillion dollars by the year 2050.

And then there is the threat of automation on the American workforce. In his book *Thank You for Being Late*, Thomas Friedman notes that automation has displaced far more workers than foreign investments or immigration. He estimates that sooner than later transcontinental trucking will be driverless. If you don't believe it just look at the most recent Ford F 150 television ad that has a man backing up to a Christmas parade float without the assistance of anyone and with his hands completely off of the wheel!

And how about our weather? When I came to church this morning I had to wear my wool overcoat before the early worship service. Between services I went outside in my shirtsleeves! Yes, it is crazy and it makes one wonder if anyone is in charge!

Last week, at the end of a bible study, someone asked me if I thought that these were "the last days"; if I thought that the world was coming to an end. I don't. I don't because I know that while these are crazy seemingly out of control times I also know that this isn't the first time things have seemed out of control. I remember the story in Isaiah, today's Old Testament lesson, and our Gospel lesson. They took place in a time not all that different from ours.

The reading in Isaiah is set sometime after the Persian ruler Cyrus, who, by the way, is referred to as Israel's "messiah", allowed those held for over a generation in Babylonian captivity to return to Jerusalem, to the homeland. They would be able to rebuild the Temple that lay in ruins, and rebuild the city. Oh, how they dreamed of that day. They sang songs of that day as they recalled the glory of

an earlier time. But when they arrived in Jerusalem they saw nothing but desertion and desolation. The land was ravaged by drought, followed by famine and inflation. Discord quickly ensued. And they cried out asking how this could have happened and if anyone is really in charge.

The prophet spoke. They were responsible, no one else. They neglected the needy in their midst and sold the poor for a pair of shoes. But in spite of themselves, God was still in charge. In the words of that old hymn, somehow “God was working out His purposes.” “O Lord, you are our Father,” the prophet said. “We are the clay, you are the potter; we are the work of your hand.” (v. 8) Somehow in the circumstances of life God is working out His purpose. God’s will will be done.

And then, turning to Mark, we see a similar thing. The gospel was written to a Jewish-Gentile blended Christian community after the Temple in Jerusalem had once again been destroyed. Christians were killed, tortured for entertainment, because of their faith. It was a confusing time that gave rise to false prophets who peddled easy answers and quick blame. They appealed to the “darker angels” that divided rather than united. Once again the cry went out, “Is anyone in charge?”

Jesus replied by acknowledging the reality that surrounded them but then He drew their attention to “the lesson of the fig tree.” When it sprouts new leaves you know that summer cannot be far behind. Look for God in the midst of the chaos. In his letter to the church in Rome the apostle Paul said that times of turmoil are but the birth pangs of God birthing something new. In the 8th chapter of that letter he goes on to say, “I do not consider this current pain worthy of being compared to the glory to be revealed.” (v. 8)

Remember, it is God who brought order out of Chaos and threw Light into the dark of Creation before any of the luminaries were planted in the heavens.

In a time such as this, Jesus told those who would take him seriously to “keep alert” and “keep awake” for the God moments that lie in your path. Amen.