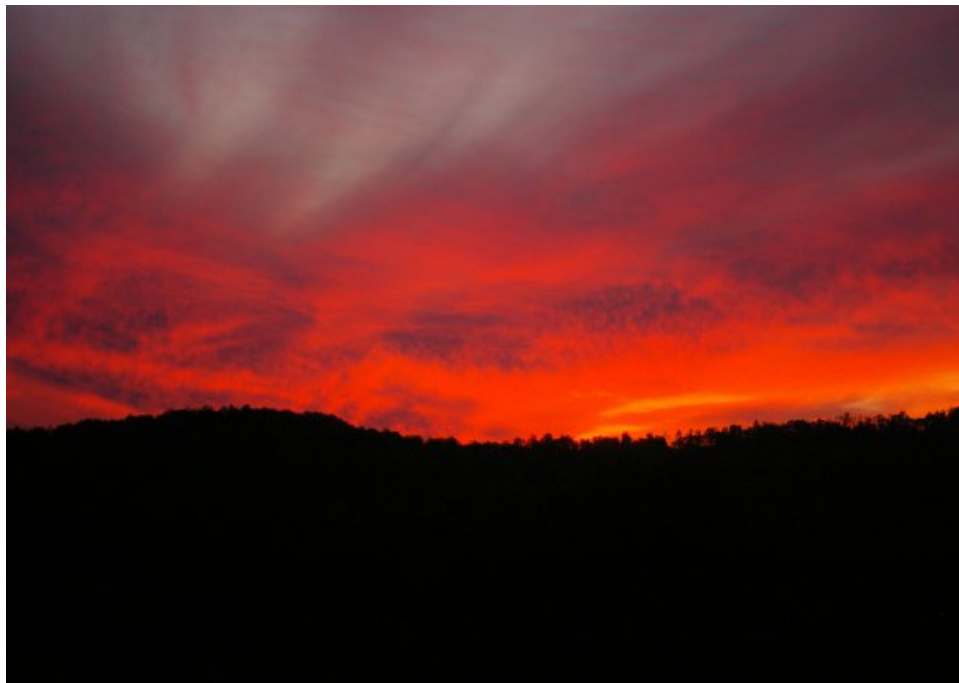


THE
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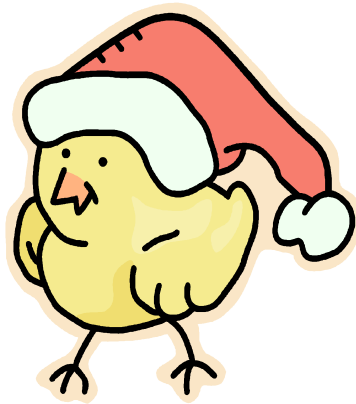


Rev. Dr. Steven L. Frazier

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Problem with Chicken Little...

1st Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36



It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving. And it was the first Sunday of Advent. Bobby Ray, Emmy Lou, and their kids, Jake and Taylor were on their way home from church. Bobby Ray was also on his way to being aggravated. Emmy Lou finally asked him, “What on earth is botherin’ you?” He grouched, “The hymns we were singin’ today. Why couldn’t we sing at least one Christmas carol? And the sermon. Who wants to hear some crazy Chicken Little mess about signs in the skies and people faintin’ all over the place? All that does is scare people to death. What’s that got to do with Christmas?” Emmy Lou just let him go. There was no use stepping in front of that train.

Bobby Ray took off work the next week to go hunting. On the way home Tuesday afternoon he stopped to see Emmy Lou, the church secretary at Mossy Creek Lutheran Church. He was leaning against the door jamb talking with her when Pastor Mark stepped out of his office. He was going to visit some folks when Bobby Ray asked him, "Did you preach that scripture from Luke Sunday? You know, the one that talks about the signs of the times and all that?" Pastor Mark said, "Yep." Bobby Ray plowed on. "Did y'all sing some Christmas carols?" Pastor Mark smiled and said, "Not yet." He wasn't stepping in front of that train either. He took off for the parking lot and told Emmy Lou, "If you need me, I'll be at the Olinger's."

After he left, Emmy Lou fumed, "What in the world is wrong with you? Don't bother Mark like that. Don't you have somethin' to do?" Bobby Ray snapped, "No, I'm done for the day." Well, you know that got Emmy Lou all riled up. She said, "Then go find somethin' to do. Go see Pastor Marianne. She's the one you should be talkin' to." Bobby Ray turned to leave and asked, "Who goes to see the preacher in the middle of the week?" Emmy Lou warned him, "You, if you don't want to spend the night in a deer stand. Don't you come home carryin' on about Advent. I don't want to hear it anymore."

I know what you're thinking. Bobby Ray wasn't going to go see Pastor Marianne just because Emmy Lou told him he should. But a few minutes later, there he was in the parking lot of Our Savior Presbyterian Church. Pastor Marianne was getting in her SUV when Bobby Ray pulled up next to her and hopped out of his truck.

“Pastor Marianne, you got a minute? I’ve got a quick question. I had a time figurin’ out the sermon Sunday. I was thinkin’, isn’t Advent about gittin’ ready for Jesus comin’?” She nodded and then asked, “Which Jesus?” Bobby Ray knew this was going to end up being what she called a “teachable moment.” It would be questions and answers from here on out. He hesitated and then asked, “There’s only one, isn’t there?” She chuckled and said, “Yeah, but are you talking about baby Jesus or Lord Jesus?” He paused again and then said, “I don’t know. Baby Jesus, I guess.” She grinned and replied, “Sunday’s sermon was about Lord Jesus. Getting ready for His return is part of Advent, too.”

Well, there was no backing up now, so Bobby Ray just kept on going. “Well, I thought Advent was all about gittin’ ready for Jesus’ birth. Mary and Joseph, the angels and the shepherds, the manger and the animals—that’s what I think of when I think of Advent. I mean, isn’t it the warm-up for Christmas?” He paused and said, “If that isn’t it, you’re goin’ to have to straighten me out on what it’s all about.”

Pastor Marianne said, “I understand what you’re saying. But sometimes two things can both be true at the same time. Advent is one of those times. During Advent we do two things at the same time—get ready for Jesus’ return and celebrate His birth. During Advent the church is saying that the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem and saved us from everything we’ve done to break God’s laws is also the Lord of all creation. That Jesus is coming back to judge the world. I know; that’s not something most people want to hear, but it’s true. Getting ready for Jesus’ return as the Lord who judges is just the flip side of

getting ready for the birth of a savior. Lord and Savior—they're both true at the same time."

Bobby Ray was slowing up, but he wasn't done. "Judgment... I thought Jesus saved us from that. Pastor Marianne quickly replied, "Uh uh. He has saved us from being condemned in the judgment. Put it this way: We won't be convicted." Bobby Ray sighed and said, "OK. Walk me through what you were sayin' in your sermon one more time." She smiled and said, "Sure. But I can't right now. Can you meet me at the food bank this evening at 7?" After Bobby Ray nodded, she said, "See ya later." You know what happened next, don't you? She left him leaning against his truck still trying to figure out how on earth Jesus could be a judge and the savior of the world all at the same time.

Later that evening, Bobby Ray drove to Mossy Creek's food bank. Pastor Marianne and some other volunteers were already sorting out canned vegetables and putting the cans on the shelves where they belonged. Bobby Ray thought he had come to talk, but he wasn't much for watching other people work, so he pitched in. After fifteen minutes of silence he figured this was another one of Pastor Marianne's teachable moments and asked, "Does this have somethin' to do with what you were sayin' in your sermon?"

Pastor Marianne looked up and said, "Sure does. Jesus said that just before He returns, there will be confusion and fear. People will be terrified by what is going on in the world. Look around. We're fighting a war that's been going on for eight years. One of our own army officers killed thirteen soldiers at Fort Hood and wounded a bunch more. Unemployment is over ten percent.

Those are signs of the time. From where I'm sitting, there's plenty of turmoil, confusion, and fear. If Jesus is going to be coming back next week or next month, wouldn't you like to be ready? That's what we're doing here."

Bobby Ray nodded his head. Then he asked "But if Jesus has saved us from our sins, what does gittin' ready for His return have to do with anything? I don't git it." Pastor Marianne said, "We're His disciples. We've promised to continue His ministry. That's hard; and hard as we try, we never get it just right. That's sin, too. It's something we'll struggle with as long as we're alive." Bobby Ray knew that was right, so he just nodded his head and kept separating cans of corn from the green beans.

Pastor Marianne continued. "And there are two kinds of sins we need to be saved from—personal and social. Remember what Paul said in Sunday's epistle lesson? 'Keep growing in love for one another and in holiness.' That's another reason we're here. Feeding people is an act of love. It's a choice we make. It makes us more like Jesus. And that's what Paul means when he's talking about holiness—bein' Jesus people. Jesus is working through us and the church to save people from social sins like poverty and hunger. Stuff like that scares us half to death. And if it doesn't, it should. When Jesus returns, He's going to give us a grade. Think of this as a homework assignment. If we don't even try, that's when social sins turn into personal sins. What kind of grade should we get if we don't even try?"

Bobby Ray slid a carton of green beans on a shelf and then stood up. "So Jesus has saved me from the stuff I've already done wrong. But He's also

saving us right now from the things we're doin' wrong as a church or a town, too? Is that it?" Pastor Marianne said, "Uh huh. Just remember that baby Jesus grew up to be the man we call Lord. We've promised to follow Him by doing what He says. Like I said, we fail, but He forgives us." Just then the bottom of a cardboard box split and cans of vegetables crashed on the floor and went rolling all over the place. "Just as well," Bobby Ray thought. Stacking green beans was easier than talking to Pastor Marianne about Advent. He was glad to finish up and go home an hour later.

You're probably thinking Bobby Ray was ready to leave Advent alone after that. But he kept on thinking about it, that and some other things. He knew Emmy Lou was mad at him for asking Pastor Mark about Advent. So he decided to make things right. He stopped by the Lutheran church the next morning after he was done hunting. He made sure Emmy Lou heard him apologize to Pastor Mark. But it wasn't necessary. He just laughed and said, "I like it when folks are asking tough questions. It sure beats having them just recycling the same old ideas they've had forever."

I know you probably would've left well enough alone. But what Pastor Mark said sounded like an open door to Bobby Ray, so he stepped right through it. "I talked to Pastor Marianne about this, but I'm not sure I get it yet. She said Jesus could be our judge and our savior all at the same time. Tell me this: What's Jesus talkin' about when He says the Son of Man is comin' in a cloud with glory and power? Is that what Pastor Marianne was talkin' about when she said Jesus was Lord and a judge? I'd sure like to figure this out because it sounded

like she was sayin' He'd grade us on everything we've ever done. And it sounded like pass/fail to me. I'll tell you what, that's scary. I'm startin' to get the Lord part she was talkin' about. But I'm still a little confused about how He can be a savior and a judge all at the same time."

Pastor Mark asked, "You're off this week, aren't you?" Bobby Ray nodded. Then Pastor Mark said, "Come on. Let's go to lunch." As they were leaving he said, "I've got an errand to run first. It won't take long." A few minutes later they were parking in front of the county courthouse. Pastor Mark was there to speak on behalf of someone in a sentencing hearing. The man had been convicted of drunk driving, hit and run, and leaving the scene of an accident. He was a member of Pastor Mark's church and looking at some serious jail time. Bobby Ray was shocked when Pastor Mark didn't ask the judge to keep the guy being sentenced out of jail. He just asked the judge to consider the fact that the man he was sentencing was sorry for what he had done, had apologized and was making amends to the people he hurt, and needed to take care of his family.

Afterwards, Bobby Ray and Pastor Mark went to lunch. He looked at Pastor Mark and said, "I didn't know pastors did stuff like that." Pastor Mark smiled wanly and said, "It's part of the job." Bobby Ray asked, "How do you decide what to say? That must be hard." Pastor Mark replied, "I try to represent Jesus. He stands for justice and works for justice through the church. Some things we do have to be punished. But He is also our Savior. He is merciful and gracious, and we should be, too." Bobby Ray sat up with a start when Pastor Mark echoed Pastor Marianne and said, "Jesus is both of those things all the

time. We respect Jesus because He is Lord. But we don't fear Him because He is merciful and gracious."

As they ate lunch Bobby Ray said to Pastor Mark, "So Advent sermons and Advent hymns just try to keep us balanced—gittin' ready for the Lord who's coming back and rememberin' the savior who has already come..."

Pastor Mark said, "Yep." He went on, "Think of that passage from Luke this way: Jesus is the Son of Man who is coming with power and great glory; He is coming back. His glory comes from His resurrection. His power comes from God. God has given Jesus the authority to judge people, churches, communities, nations—everything! Pastor Marianne is right—watch the news, and you're seeing the signs of the times. That's what the news is. And frankly, right now it does sound a lot like what Jesus was talking about in last week's Gospel lesson. So the question isn't if or when we get ready, the question is how? But if we're always trying to be the best disciples we can, we'll always be ready. And here's the good news: We won't get an "F" because He will always forgive our failures." Bobby Ray asked, "What if we don't try?" Pastor Mark shrugged his shoulders and said, "Good question."

Well, Sunday came and found Bobby Ray and Emmy Lou, and their kids at Our Savior Presbyterian Church. Emmy Lou was just grateful that Bobby Ray hadn't said any more about Advent. After church, they stopped to visit with Pastor Marianne. Emmy Lou's heart just sank when Bobby Ray said, "You know, I've been thinkin' about what we've been talkin' about. Some people say we oughta be scared when Jesus comes back. They're a bunch of Chicken Littles.

And the problem with Chicken Little is that he's nothin' but bad news." Pastor Marianne smiled and said, "That's right. But Jesus' promises are nothing but good news. What did He say last week? 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.' That includes His promises. He'll judge us, but He'll also save us; He's promised. What's there to be afraid of? See? We can get ready for the Lord's return and remember His birth all at the same time." Bobby Ray agreed and said, "Sure can. Our Judge is a merciful Savior." Amen.

