



“AS IF”
SCRIPTURE: JONAH 3: 1-5, 10; I CORINTHIANS 7:29-31
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Her mother ordered pancakes with strawberries and whipped cream. After all they were on vacation—why not live a little. She ordered an eggs and bacon.

That’s when everyone at the Denny’s on Oahu got the chilling message on their phones: “BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.”

Sarah Kimmorley, an Australian reporter for “Business Insider” describes what unfolded next as terrifying.¹

People calling loved ones to tell them goodbye forever. A hotel lobby in total chaos as voices over the PA system told people to go their rooms and get in the bathroom and shut the door.

A father on the street with his children; lifted a manhole and lowered his children into the storm drain hoping they might be safe there. Frantic students at the University race around campus not sure where to go or what to do. A solitary person sea kayaking considered simply staying out at sea as boats raced from the shores to put distance between themselves and the island.

Sarah’s waiter at Denny’s nervously said, “It might be a false alarm. But if it isn’t there’s nothing we can do about it anyway.”

Sarah’s mother worried more about her pancakes, defaulting into a tenacious state of denial. Her father sat glued to the TV, sober and earnestly waiting for instructions of what to do. Her sister cried and could barely speak, panicked and afraid.

38 minutes must have seemed like an eternity—that’s how long it was before they got the message that it was a false alarm.

Sarah says that it took a while to make the transition from feeling as if their last minutes on earth were upon them, to accepting that no missile was on its way, that everything was clear.

¹ Sarah Kimmorley, “I was in Hawaii when an alert warned of an impending missile attack — here’s what it was like in those 38 minutes of fear,” Business Insider <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/hawaii-missile-threat-my-personal-story-2018-1>

The rest of the day they felt shaky, wary, vigilant—more aware, more awake, increasingly angry, and reflective. What if it had been real—what should they have done, what does it mean to live in a world where things are on such a razor's edge?

What would you do with your last 38 minutes? Would the way you live today be different if you knew this day was your last?

As human beings it is almost impossible for us to sustain such awareness—that life can turn on a dime, that life can end without warning, without any instructions of how to get through a tragedy, a terminal illness, an experience of violence that means life will never be the same.

How do we live as if our lives are not our own—when coping with life so often means proceeding as if we are in control of our own destinies.

As Christians we are called to live in time collapsed, time conflated—in the layers of truth that every moment entails—layers of history, generations, layers of present realities, complexities, and perspectives, and layers of future possibilities—full of both promise and peril.

That emerging church in Corinth was struggling with this same difficult call to Jesus followers. Live in the world, engaged, courageously, faithfully, compassionately, prophetically... but do not be so immersed in the world that you think this reality is all there is.

Paul is sending the equivalent of a text alert to the church in Corinth—incoming apocalypse. Get yourself together—be prepared for the world as we know it to end. This is not a drill.

And Paul gives his Corinthian brothers and sisters more to go on than the Hawaii officials did.

- ◆ If you're married, live like you are not.
- ◆ If you're mourning, live like you are not.
- ◆ If you're rejoicing, live like you are not.
- ◆ If you're purchasing things, live like you have nothing.

A curious, if not cryptic, set of instructions to our ears.

My gut tells me if I get notice that the apocalypse is inbound, I am not living like I am not married, I am going to want to go down with the people I love the most around me.

But Paul is talking to this community of Jesus followers about something very different than gut reactions. Remember last week, we talked about the Corinthian context—Sin City was its nickname. It was a city of extreme wealth and excesses of all kinds.

Paul just told them a few verses ago, they are missing the point of how Christians live if they are treating other bodies as commodities, if they are letting food, drink, sex, or material things be the organizing center of their lives.

Paul calls the Corinthian church to live in the world without being captive to it. He is calling them to tap into deeper streams of meaning than the world of material gain or even of marital relationships.

Marriage can divide one's attention, one's loyalties. The urgency of now for Paul is that those married don't allow their marriages to distract them from pleasing God. Don't let pleasing your spouse get in the way of pleasing God.

Indeed we can make idols of our families, of our parents' expectations for us, or our kids' wants, of our spouse's needs.

Paul is telling them that there is urgency to this way of life that he is calling them toward—time is growing short, the world as they know it will be passing away.

Now we could look back with our 2018 eyes and think this was the ultimate false alarm—after all about 2000 years have passed and the earth is still spinning on its axis, and as far as we know, Jesus has not been back—and we know we'd hear about it on Twitter if he did.

So why listen to this nonsense about "from now on" live AS IF Jesus is due here anytime now? It's probably a false alarm and besides we can't do anything about it if it is. The status quo is much more comfortable, much more predictable.

But, what would you change if Jesus was almost here? What about your life would change if it weren't a false alarm?

God called Jonah into Ninevah to deliver some hard news—reluctantly Jonah went, and just a little ways into the assignment, the people of Nineveh repent. And God calls an audible—changes God's mind and instead of destroying them, God forgives them. And my guess is nothing was ever the same in Nineveh.

Try as he might Jonah couldn't outrun the urgency of God's now—and the possibility that a new day is dawning despite our fears that all is surely lost.

Last week three women spoke to capacity crowds in Asheville about lives that are immersed in the world, but not captive to it.

First, Asheville's own Oralene Anderson Graves Simmons spoke at the MLK Breakfast. She told the story of being the first African American to attend Mars Hill University—the great-great-granddaughter of an enslaved man named Joe Anderson who was locked up as collateral to force the paying of the university's debt. He was owned by a Trustee, the Rev. Jesse Woodson Anderson.

She told of being 17 up in her dorm room and hearing a mob that gathered outside her window threatening to burn the dorm down, saying they brought a rope to hang her.

Oralene lived as if they could not stop her. She tapped in to a deeper stream of meaning—a deep aquifer of courage and resilience. She was present to what was happening but not attached to it; she did not let it rule her. She graduated, as did her daughter and her granddaughter after her.

Then, Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, spoke at UNCAA. She told of leaving the legal profession because of her research into mass incarceration of African American males, who are 5 times more likely to be incarcerated than whites. She has dedicated her life to addressing systemic racism now as a moral and spiritual malady, rather than something that can be remedied by reforming our systems of justice and punishment. She walked away from what she knew, from her core competencies, from her training and her social capital.

Michelle lives as if the current ways can and will come to an end. She lives as if she can catch a glimpse of a new world even now.

Patrisse Cullors, the co-founder of Black Lives Matter, spoke Friday night about how her life completely changed after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. It brought her to a place where she felt compelled to stop living as if violence against black bodies is something she could accept.

Her #BlackLivesMatter hash tag ushered in a new day, a new way of asking questions about race in this country—she disrupted the patriarchal past of the Civil Rights Movement and the homophobia that has permeated the activism of many people of faith and the white-washing of Civil Rights figures like Dr. King.

She lives as if the old ways have lost their currency—as if patriarchy and homophobia and racism no longer hold sway. And she has invited this country, even the world, into a way of being together that is defined by solidarity, not selfishness; and intersectionality, not individualism.

#BlackLivesMatter links oppressions across lines of gender and sexual identity and race, and Patrisse persists *as if* the US government has not classified the movement she helped found as a terrorist organization.

How would your life change if you had only 38 minutes left? How would your life change if your community and your family was being torn apart by violence? How would your life change if you saw that your vocation was propping up a system that was helping make a whole race of people disposable?

How would your life change if you let your faith collapse time—if you were able to see the past giving birth to a future that we can taste even now? How would your life change if you believed that no matter who you are—no matter your age or your social position or your prospects in this world, that God is calling you to live as if the world as we know it is passing away?

Following Jesus does not go according to our plans. No long range planning, no perfect budget numbers, no 401K, no retirement party that buttons up your career, no insurance policy that your family will have everything they need into perpetuity.

Following Jesus is an act of faith. And faith is nothing if not the destroyer of time—for it is not growing old that is our aspiration, but it is growing bold—bold enough to believe that God empowers us to live *as if* we have everything and nothing to lose all at once. Bold enough to believe that this is not a drill.

Thanks be to God.