

3 December 2023

Why So Serious?

Mark 13:24-37

Our scripture today comes from Jesus' last week on earth. His disciples show him the massive stones of the Jerusalem temple, but Jesus says, "Don't get too attached to them. Soon they will all be destroyed." His disciples ask, "When will that happen?" We read a portion of Jesus' answer in Mark 13, verses 24-37:

²⁴ *'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,*

and the moon will not give its light,

²⁵ *and the stars will be falling from heaven,*

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ *Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

²⁸ *'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

³² *'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'*

As we begin this new liturgical year, I'm starting something different. Since I came here some six years ago, I have been preaching sermon series – series that I have planned myself, based on ideas I've encountered or needs I've perceived. There are good things about that approach to sermon planning, but there are also problems. The main drawback is that when I get to choose what I preach on, I naturally incline toward my own favorite passages and often say the same things. That's not really good for either me or you. So this year I'm going to preach the preselected passages that are laid out in the ecumenical common lectionary. That will force me to study and preach beyond my pet scriptures and top ten themes. Sometimes I might even end up preaching from passages that I would never choose for myself.

Like today.

So how did you respond when you heard our reading from Mark 13, about the moon being darkened and the stars falling from the sky, about the Son of Man returning in clouds with the angels to gather the elect and heaven and earth passing away? If you were like me, you cringed a bit. Sounds like Revelation – another book I seldom preach from by choice. In fact, this passage in Mark is called "The Little Apocalypse": it's like the starter set for Revelation. It

evokes images of those televangelists claiming that details in the text correspond to events in today's news, then declaring that the End of the World is right around the corner! (Which always puzzles me. I mean, if that's true, why do they keep asking for money? What good's that going to do them?) Scriptures like this have prompted confident End Time projections that have been consistently wrong for thousands of years. In our day, you may remember the "Left Behind" books and movies from the 2000s. In my youth it was the Hal Lindsey books *Countdown to Armageddon* and so on, and the movie *Thief in the Night*, which traumatized the 12-year-old me so much that for years any time I couldn't find my parents, my first thought was that they had been Raptured, and I'd been left behind. I've healed, mostly, from that trauma, but you can see why you've never heard me try to deal with this passage.

But we do need to try. Because this isn't an outlier in the New Testament. If this sort of stuff were only found in Revelation, for instance, maybe we could write it off as just one book written for one historical group of Christians undergoing severe persecution. But it's not just Revelation. Paul does some of this in Thessalonians and other places, and of course we have this passage in Mark, which is taken up again by Matthew and Luke. At some point we need to ask why this stuff is here. Why are we so grim, so focused on the end of the world? What are we supposed to get from all this? And how can we deal with it without getting caught up in Hal Lindsey-style End-Times scams?

To begin with, I should go back and summarize the first part of Jesus' speech to the disciples, because our reading was only part two. In the first half of the chapter, Jesus doesn't describe cosmic events like the moon being darkened; instead, he warns the disciples that times are coming when they will face persecution and betrayals and will see their holiest shrine torn down and have to flee to the hills. All this is scary, but not supernatural. In fact, it happened almost exactly as described about forty years later, when the Roman generals Vespasian and Titus laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the city and the temple. So the first half of the book is a this-worldly warning about an imminent crisis. Only after that do we come this passage, which Jesus begins with: "But in those days, *after* that suffering . . ." Jesus is doing two things here. First, he's warning the disciples about an earthly upheaval that is coming, soon enough that some of them will be alive to see it, and second he is promising that there will come another time, some unspecified time *after* that catastrophe, when time and history itself will end, when this world will be dissolved and replaced by a new one. Remembering that Jesus is talking about two different things in this chapter helps us to navigate this confusing chapter – especially the question of *when* all this is supposed happen.

Remember, that was the disciples' original question. Like the End-time prophets today, they were mostly concerned with *when*. And Jesus' first response, back in verse 7, is to say: *When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.* So don't take every earthly disaster as a sign of the end. Don't try to predict the time. But then, in verse 28, Jesus says: *From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.* So, wait, we *should* try to predict the time? And then, in verse 32 we read, *But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* So, we should not try to predict the time, but we *should* predict the time, but we *can't* predict the time.

Let me offer some humble suggestions for dealing with all this. First, Jesus promises that his followers will face hard times. Wars, disasters, famines and the like are a part of living on earth, and Christians are not exempt. Indeed, sometimes Christians will have it worse. That certainly happened often in the first centuries of the church, and while it feels very distant to us in the prosperous, heavily-churched American Midwest, Christians still live in danger in places around the world today: Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and so on. Jesus tells his disciples to prepare for hardship, but reminds them that when hardship comes, that does not mean that the end has come.

But that doesn't mean that there is no end. As Jesus makes clear in the part of his speech that we read, there will come a time when the Son of Man will return, when this earth will be renewed and restored into what the New Testament calls a "new heaven and a new earth." In the end, God will take a hand, and all will be set right. You may trust in this; but, again, don't try to predict it. You can't. As Jesus says, "Even the angels don't know when , even *I* don't know. Only the Father knows."

So what does that mean for us? What are we supposed to do? Stay alert. Stay awake. Since you don't know when the Son will return, keep looking. Yes, but *where* are we supposed to look? Jesus has already told us not to pay any attention to the stuff that makes headlines – wars and disasters and all that. Look back at verse 28: *From the fig tree, learn its lesson*. Jesus doesn't point to the stirring events of history but at the normal processes of creation. Think back on the rest of Jesus' teaching. Where did he tell people to look for the Kingdom of God? In mustard seeds, in grain broadcast over a field, in smidges of yeast, in trees and grapevines that bear fruit. The lesson for us in today's scripture is to watch for God. We will be tempted to look for God in the sudden and dramatic and shocking, but that would be a mistake. If we want to see God, we should stop looking at the horrors and tragedies that are on the news, stop looking at the actions of powerful presidents and prime ministers, and look instead at the small things all around us: insignificant seeds that quietly become great, small things like yeast that invisibly change their environment, and quiet, unassuming saints that gradually transform everything and everyone they touch.

Yes, the Kingdom of God is coming. There will come a time when God will reclaim for himself the world and the people he created. But that's not just in the future. It's already started. It's all around us, if you know where to look. So look.

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I reminded us earlier that many followers of God in history have lived lives of oppression, persecution, and fear. One of those times of persecution was in Judea during the brutal oppression of the Roman Empire. No wonder people were looking for a Messiah to muster an army and start a war of deliverance. But they were looking in the wrong place, weren't they? Those who sought hope in war only ended up prompting the destruction of Jerusalem. A few, though, put their hope in a child born in a stable in Bethlehem, and look what's happened since.