

LENT 5 - March 17, 2024
Mark 13:1-8, 24-37 - The End of the Age

It is hard to read this week's appointed verses without going to that well-aged, somewhat humorous image of the prophet of doom: the wild-eyed, shaggy-haired, tattered-clothed man yelling into the crowd, "The end is near!" Doomsday scenarios pop up from time to time. The Y2K phenomenon, and the fear it created, projected doomsday scenarios and offered plenty of advice for how to prepare for the end of the world as we know it.

Well, this time the prophet of doom is right. We can see that, for Jesus, as he looks ahead into what we now consider Holy Week, it is crystal clear that **His** end is near. We are looking at events that will lead directly to Jesus' arrest, trial, sentencing, and crucifixion. Following the last verse in today's passage, we read: It was now two days before the Passover celebration and the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The leading priests and the teachers of religious law were still looking for an opportunity to capture Jesus secretly and put him to death. "But not during the Passover," they agreed, "or there will be a riot."

Even though Jesus has taught consistently that the pain, suffering, and death will be followed by resurrection, it is hard to imagine him being unmoved or not agitated by what is to come. This is not the Jesus of John's gospel, who coolly speaks from the cross as if he were in the middle of a spa treatment ("Woman, here is your son." "I am thirsty." "It is finished.") The Jesus of Mark will agonize over his impending death as he weeps in the garden, imploring his disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." In the midst of the horror that is the cross he will cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The end is near, and it is going to be dreadful, painful, inhuman.

Jesus speaks of **His** end, and it sounds very much as if he were speaking of the end of all things. He has taught on three separate occasions the nature of his works, as Messiah: it will involve suffering and death, as well as rising to new life. His disciples, as if on cue, remark upon the magnificence of the Temple edifice, and Jesus' reply is terse, and saturated with meaning: "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

An interesting thing about the old temples in Greece (like the temple to Poseidon or Athena) is that the temples that once stood there were dismantled by the Romans during their occupation of Greece and transported to other parts of the empire and used in other building projects. A disciple's exclamation about large stones, and Jesus' terse response about their imminent dilapidation, is a reminder of this not-well-known activity.

Acquaintance with stone in the ancient world, was something of a pastime, a topic for small talk. For example, the lintel stone covering the doorway in the Tholos tomb at Mycenae is estimated to weigh 120 tons - an amazing sight. Every major city in the ancient world would have had prominent examples of monumental stone architecture, almost all of it with civic, religious, and economic connotations.

The observation from one of the disciples as Jesus leaves the temple sounds like nothing more than ancient small talk. Like any awkward conversation where one tries to change the topic of conversation by bringing up the weather, a sports score, or what happened last night on a popular TV show, the disciple makes an exclamation that was probably quite common for any visitor to a big city in the ancient world: "Wow, look at those huge rocks ... That building is ginormous."

Jesus wants no part of the small talk. He thumbs his nose at the architecture and bluntly declares that it will all come tumbling down. Talk about imminent destruction puts this gospel either right before, during, or after the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE. Familiarity with dilapidated architecture was common among the ancients. By the first century, some of the iconic temples of Archaic and Classical Greece had begun to decay. Earthquakes in many parts of the world regularly caused destruction. What has rarely been considered is the intentional dismantling of impressive lithic architecture. When the Romans engaged in such behaviour, it held significant symbolic and metaphorical value: taking apart the beauty, ingenuity, and religious impulse of a structure stone by stone and reassembling or re-purposing it elsewhere. This would constitute a significant sabotage and subversion to the culture being dismantled.

The apocalyptic discourse that takes place seems more interested in profiling the power of God than the power of kingdoms and principalities. Yes, the Romans did raze parts of Jerusalem. But the rumours of wars and falling of rocks is only the “beginning.” Eventually there will be a darkened sun and moon, falling stars, and shaking heavens. Mark is more concerned with the Day of the Lord than with the day of Rome. Everyone would have seen and known Rome’s approaching of Jerusalem, but the timing of the coming of the Son of Man is unknowable. There will be signs and omens, but the discourse consistently advocates: “watch” and “stay awake.”

The action of God profiled here is more like the dismantling of old Greek temples than the warring destruction of the temple by the Romans. It’s an intentional, if rapid, undermining of the temple’s *raison d’etre*. God’s reign no longer seems compatible with the way the temple had been functioning. Its destruction is God’s doing. This apocalyptic discourse is

a prelude to the passion narrative. In the following chapter, Jesus says: "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands." So, the connection between the temple's destruction and Jesus' death coheres into an apocalyptic interpretation of those events. Jesus' death and resurrection are an apocalyptic moment - a time when a veil is lifted and God intervenes in the world. It is no time for nervous small talk about stones. The kingdom of God is at hand.

The disciples immediately go on high alert: When? What sign will we have? Jesus is not playing, he has moved on to describe the imposters who will claim his name for their own purposes, the wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines. All these, Jesus says, constitute "the beginning of the birth pains."

Jesus' description of the complete destruction of the Temple is accurate to a chilling degree. But Jesus has explicitly spoken three times of the destruction of the temple of the Lord that is his own body, and later in this gospel, those accusing Jesus will confuse the two temples in their testimony: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'"

After Jesus' suffering, the following chapters state: the sun will be darkened; the powers in the heavens will be shaken; the Son of Man will come with power, with angels attending him; and then three admonitions to "keep alert/keep awake."

This is Jesus' apocalypse, a word that simply means "uncovering." Jesus is uncovering both the cosmic meaning of his death and the simple fact of it. Heaven and earth will be shaken, and this is all part of the work of the Messiah, God's anointed one. His message is urgent, and in keeping

with all of Mark, it is uncovered and yet still veiled, so that no one near him seems to comprehend.

A few years ago, the notable television news show “60 Minutes” went inside the Livingston, Texas facility where death row prisoners are housed until their executions. One of the inmates, Perry Williams described the countdown to his execution, once his date of death had become known:

Inmate : It’s one thing to know exactly the hour and the time that you’re going to die. It does a lot to you. Shakes. It’s like waking up in cold sweats - having dreams about being executed.

Interviewer: You actually had shakes and cold sweats?

Inmate: Yes sir.

Interviewer: Why do you think you were reacting that way?

Inmate: Fear, fear of the unknown, fear of death.

It would be a mistake to separate Jesus’ words in this passage from his clearly articulated understanding that his death is imminent. Physical manifestations of fear, dreams of his own impending death, his dread of the unknown ... Jesus is a man on death row, awaiting his horrible fate. And yet, the promise of God’s bringing new life from this death manages to penetrate the darkness of his hour. God’s saving action is at work, even in the midst of fear.

Jesus places his own anxiety in the context of God’s saving action. Jesus’ call to “keep alert/stay awake” seems particularly potent as we observe the growing evidence that climate change is here, and may already be irreversible. Is there perhaps a call to action in this passage? Is the time ripe?

Scholars have acknowledged what they call “the resiliency of apocalyptic

belief, that is the fact that there are those who believe “the end is near” in every generation. Terror is powerful, and thrives particularly well in times of oppression. Yet, the kingdom of God, as Jesus has described it, is an event marked by healing, feeding, and gathering into community and is rooted not in fear, but in our conviction that we are called to love one another, and in so doing love God.

So, what drives authors – in biblical times or today – to seek to peer into the future and describe the end of history? The answer likely rests in the belief that knowing the future not only sheds lights on present problems, but also provides some relief from them. And this is especially true in confusing and uncertain times. So, our passage was **not** intended to give us concrete hints about Jesus’ triumphant return and the end of the world, let alone a time line for such events, as it was trying to frame and interpret some of the challenges Jesus’ followers were facing.

These challenges may have included disappointment at Jesus’ delayed return, the immense social and religious upheaval caused by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, possible persecution by secular and religious forces, confusion among Jesus’ followers about whether they had missed his second coming, and conflicts between rival Christian leaders.

In short, life was something of a mess for many in Mark’s community, so Mark employs the symbols and metaphors of apocalyptic traditions about Jesus, to place the struggles and questions of his people in a cosmic context and, in this way, offer a measure of both perspective and comfort.

In a nutshell, apocalyptic literature stems from a worldview that believes that everything happening on earth represents and correlates with a

larger, heavenly struggle between good and evil. It reads into earthly events cosmic significance and anticipates future events on earth in light of the coming battle between the forces of God and the devil. Consequently, it tries to make sense of current events and experiences by casting them in a larger, cosmic framework, giving comfort to those currently suffering or being oppressed.

Because of this dualism, and because apocalyptic literature tends to be highly symbolic, it's ripe for reading all kinds of things into it – like predictions about the end of the world! But this chapter in Mark – and other passages, notably the book of Revelation – were not written so that we could ferret out signs of the end. Rather, they were written to offer comfort to first-century believers struggling to make sense of their world and lives. It's 'way more helpful to read this and similar passages in light of the challenges its original readers were facing, challenges that might be akin to some of our own.

Mark's community was not only struggling with the fall of the Jerusalem Temple introduced into first-century Judaism and Christianity, but also the harassment by those claiming to be Jesus or some other messianic figure returned. Mark's people were caught up in "wars and rumours of war" and probably found comfort in the belief that Jesus had anticipated this, offering words of encouragement through this Gospel.

In our own day and age, that kind of encouragement is still valuable. Though our wars may be different, at times, we are still harassed by a fear that the world is falling apart. To twenty-first century believers, just as to first century disciples, Jesus has the same message, "do not fear."

Apocalyptic literature, as odd or peculiarly future-oriented as it may seem, is actually very much about the present. Many – in fact way too

many! – Christians have come to believe that the question asked by Peter, James, John, and Andrew, is **the** central question of the Christian faith: “When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?” The disciples were talking about the destruction of the Temple. But we ask the same question about the other predictions, prophecies, expectations, and promises of Scripture: “When will this be, and what will be the sign that it is about to happen?”

We want to know when, we profess, so that we can be prepared, so that we can be ready. But perhaps that’s the point: we are invited to be ready **all** the time. We are not called simply to live our lives with no thought of God or neighbour but keenly looking for the sign of God’s imminent coming so that we can clean up our act. Rather, we are called to live **always** anticipating the activity of God.

We are called to live in joy and confidence - joy in the knowledge that God has revealed God’s grace, mercy and goodness to us and all the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Knowing God’s love in Christ, we are called to share that love with others joyfully, and live in the confidence that comes from trusting the promise that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us, restoring the world to its intended glory.

In time. In God’s time. We would like to know when that is. But that is not our calling. We are called to live **now**, allowing the promises of God about the future to infuse our every present moment. Because when you live looking for the activity of God here and now, you begin to see it - in an act of kindness of a friend, in an opportunity to help another, in the outreach ministry of a congregation, in the chance to listen deeply to the hurt of another. God shows up in all kinds of places, working with us, for us, through us, and in us. You just have to look. When will this happen?

Now. What will be the sign? When you see people acting as Jesus did.
Even here. Even now.

Amen.

Prayers for Lent 5 - March 17

We were dead in our sins, but the word of God entered into our tomb and called us out into new life. Let us pray to the Father, knowing that he listens to us. Loving God, thank you for the gift of new life that you have given to us through the waters of our baptism. Help us, as your baptised people to daily die to sin and rise to new life with Christ in the power of the Holy spirit.

We pray for all those who are mourning the death of a loved one. Comfort them in the knowledge that Jesus has won a victory over death, so that everyone who dies in Christ may have eternal life. As we move close to Easter, help us to live as Easter people who face death in the certain hope of resurrection knowing that we will be raised up together with all who have died in the faith of Christ.

We pray for hospices and for people who work with the dying. Keep them strong, and give them peace to do their difficult work with dignity and sensitivity. We pray for all who work with those suffering from substance abuse. Use them to make a difference to people's lives, and to help them start their life anew.

Comforting God, we pray for those who are suffering; physically, spiritually, or mentally. We pray for the lonely, the abandoned, the homeless, the hurting.

O God, in your divine mystery you embrace difference in unity, and you call your people to live in peace with all. Free us from racial and ethnic prejudice and the dread of difference. Free our society from centuries of violence against the other. Break down the walls that separate your people by colour, culture, religion, and sexual orientation. You invite us to recognize and reverence your divine image and likeness in our neighbour.

God of peace and compassion, we join the prayers of others as we pray for peace and justice in all countries with armed conflict: Palestine and Israel, Ukraine and Russia, many countries in Africa, India, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Mexico, and Colombia; in India, where Parliament is voting on a citizenship law that excludes Muslims; for the visible and invisible injuries of trauma for still captured and just free Israeli hostages; for the starving people of Gaza awaiting aid; for the hopeful, as

Japan courts say a same-sex marriage ban is illegal; for the hundreds of young tech victims rescued from the Philippines “love scam” centre where they were forced into running illegal operations online; for the grieving in Australia’s gold mine collapse; for the people of Haiti as gang violence sweeps through the capital city; for people like Ibrahim Abu Hani, baker and co-owner of Bartool Cakes, a family business in Rafah in the Gaza Strip, that is making cakes for people living in tents; for the many worldwide, daily, creatively working for peace, love, pardon, faith, hope, and joy. We thank you, God, for how you work in and through us.

Let us pray for our spiritual leaders and church authorities: BC Synod, Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, all pastors, priests, deacons, councils, musicians, and lay leaders. Today we uplift St. Paul's Lutheran in Prince Rupert and Pr. Diana Edis, Our Saviour Lutheran in Richmond and Pr. Christoph Reiners, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Ours may be one small voice, but let it be a voice for wholeness, for healing, for peace, for love, for You! All this we ask through your son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray ...

Our Father ...