

Scripture Lesson: Mark 13:1-13

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 47

¹ As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" ² Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." ³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" ⁵ Then Jesus began to teach them, saying, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸ 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. ⁹ "As for yourselves, beware, for they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. ¹⁰ And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. ¹¹ When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit. ¹² Sibling will betray sibling to death and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ¹³ and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Mark 13:1-13

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"Birth Pangs"

Rev. Amy Terhune

There's an old story about a priest and a rabbi from local parishes who were standing by the side of the road holding up signs. The rabbi's sign read, "The End is Near!" The priest, on the other side of the road, held up a sign which read, "Turn before it's too late!" They held up their signs as each car passed.

"Get a job," The first driver yelled at them when he saw the sign.

The second driver, immediately behind the first, yelled, "Leave us alone, you religious freaks!"

Shortly thereafter, just beyond the curve ahead of them, the two clergy heard screeching tires and a splash followed by more screeching tires and another splash. The rabbi looked over at the priest and said, "Maybe we should phrase our signs a little differently?"

The priest responded thoughtfully, "Perhaps they simply ought to say, 'Bridge Out.'" [from "When the Unthinkable Happens" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Half of the laughter out there is mercy laughter, I think, but thank you anyway. For those of you who keep track of such things, I would remind you that in the church, the Christian new year begins with the first Sunday in Advent, which is a mere 2 weeks away. So here we are, wrapping up the church year, and the prescribed lessons for the day get a little wonky. As the days get shorter and colder, I find myself coming to the lessons for the day with a healthy mix of chagrin and sarcasm. Oh good! Doom and gloom! End of the world. My favorite. Just what we all need. Yippie!

If you do a quick search on Google, you'll find that there have always been those who talk about the end of the world. According to that great bastion of scholarly wisdom Wikipedia, the earliest doomsday predictors were generally popes, monks or priests, who conveniently directed people's attention to the impending end of the world when public policy was particularly bad. I'm simplifying a little, but I'm not completely off base. A whole slew of people predicted the year 1000 would be our end. Another whole slew predicted the year 2000. We all saw how that turned out. Round about the 1400s, when the black plague started taking out whole towns in Europe, the general population got more serious about the end of the world. Since then, there've been literally hundreds who've predicted our demise. Martin Luther thought it would come by 1600. Good old John Wesley said it would be 1836. No idea how he got that number. Isaac Newton said it would be after 2060, which is intriguing. Meanwhile, the theoretical physicists tell us the universe expands and contracts, sort of like an immense cosmic breath, every 22 billion years, which gives us another 16-18 billion years to go. On the other hand, some terrorist could drop a nuclear bomb on just the wrong tectonic fault line tomorrow, and that'd be the end of the world as we know it. (I feel fine....).

If I seem a little flippant about all of this, it's because I am. The ones I'm frankly most likely to take seriously are the climate scientists, some of whom predict the demise of life on earth in 12-15 years, and others of whom seem to have more faith in the resilience and ingenuity of humankind to develop solutions that will avert crisis, all of which I suspect speaks more to the character of the scientist doing the predicting than to any concrete evidence for their various hypotheses.

When we dig into our lesson this morning, it's a curious exchange. Remember that there are no skyscrapers, no electric lights, no 5-mile bridges. The wonders of our world aren't imaginable to those of Jesus' world. The temple in Jerusalem was wonder to those of the ancient world. According to scripture, it stood 300 cubits high, or about 450 feet high, which is approximately the size of a building with 22 floors. More modern archeologists say the temple probably wasn't that high, maybe more like 12-15 floors high, or 250-300 feet, but still, in the ancient world, that's immense. Similar structures would only have only existed in places like Egypt or Rome – nobody who lived in that region had ever seen anything like that. It was made out of solid, white marble blocks, some of them 12 feet long and 20 or 30 feet high. The roof was gilded with gold, so it would be so bright in the desert sunshine that you could hardly look at it without your eyes watering. Even at night, by firelight, starlight and moonlight, that white marble and gold roof would be almost iridescent. It was gorgeous – an enduring testimony to the presence and goodness of God.

So, imagine what it must have been like for them to hear the son of God respond to their stunned admiration of God's temple by promising it's destruction.

The disciples didn't get it. They thought this a horrible omen. Most of us think so, too. We hear scripture passages like this, and they're just a little too archaic, a little too doomsday, a little too out-of-touch with modernity to take all that seriously. But if we cut through the archaic imagery and scary talk, we find that Jesus has some very practical lessons to teach us.

The first lesson is beware. That's the word in our lesson today. But I'm going to confess to you that I'm annoyed by that translation. It's not wrong, but in English, "beware" is a cautionary, slow-down kind of word when we feel danger. Beware. Be careful. But the Greek word there is βλέπετε (*blepete*), which is rooted in the verb to see. In other words, pay attention. Keep watch. Look out. Observe. When we hear "beware", we want to pull back, but Jesus is saying the opposite: engage! Look! See! Watch! Get out there! Understand! Know what's happening! Be on the lookout. Now *blepete* is translated from the Hebrew *sim lev*, which is an idiom meaning "pay attention!" but it literally translates as "put your heart into it."

Expounding on this idea, Lori Wagner writes, “Despite the darkness coming, despite the trials and tribulations he knows they will face on account of him, despite all of the turmoil he knows is in store, the chaos and confusion, the false prophets, and distractions, and misunderstandings, and misleading ideas about him and about God, Jesus wants his disciples to stay alert to the “signs” of God in their midst, the “metaphors” that point to truth, and to Jesus’ presence among them even in the midst of sorrow and suffering. Jesus wants us to stay focused on who we are – followers of Jesus – even when doubt may tempt to consume us... Worship.... is “paying attention” to God amid distractions. Prayer.... is “paying attention” to God amid a noisy culture. [2 ¶s adapted from “Sim Lev!” by Lori Wagner, www.Sermons.com.] And service, mission, justice – these are the activities into which we pour our hearts, with eyes wide open, because the Kingdom of God is right there in plain sight for those with eyes and hearts to see it coming together amid the rubble.

I like something that J. David Bianchin wrote in *Leadership Magazine*. He used the analogy of a basketball game. In the 1987 NCAA Regional Finals, Louisiana State University was leading Indiana by eight points with only a few minutes left in the game. As is often the case with a team in the lead, LSU began playing a different ball game. The LSU players were beginning to watch the clock rather than wholeheartedly play the game. As a result of this shift in focus, Indiana closed the gap, won the game by one point, and eventually went on to become NCAA champions. David Bianchin goes on to say that God does not want us wasting pointless energy watching the clock. God wants us to be in obedient service. [from Volume 8, #4; as used in “Preparing For An Unknowable Future” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

There has never been a time in history where there weren’t leaders with Messiah complexes, and wars and rumors of wars, and earthquakes and famines and epidemics and trouble. That’s not a sign of the end. It’s a fact of life. Don’t watch the clock. Engage the suffering. Let God work in and through us. And we’ll be ready to meet God whenever it comes.

A second thing he says is that the good news must be proclaimed. We do that by living it. William G. Carter offers insightful words when he writes, “This is a world of chaos and cruelty, where the innocent suffer and lives are put at risk. Mark knows that. But Mark also knows something else. In the words of a favorite hymn of the church: “And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us; We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure; One little word shall fell him ... [from “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” by Martin Luther, UMH #110.]

“... and the Word is Jesus Christ. He is stronger than all that can hurt or destroy. That is the Word we must proclaim, the Word we must speak at all costs. The world may be beset by evil, but it belongs to God. We may be in love with our own destruction, but we have been claimed by the very Son of God...

“The four disciples wanted to know, “When will the kingdom come?” as if it were a distant, glorious age. But the church cannot ponder the arrival of the coming age as if it were a bus running behind schedule. We are given the task of proclaiming what God has begun in Jesus Christ. The faithful Christian never sits on a mountain to await the Second Coming. No, our job is to take seriously Christ’s First Coming. [3 ¶s from “Something To Do While The World Falls Apart” by William G. Carter, www.Sermons.com.]

Pay Attention. Be Alert. Share Christ. And rest assured, my friends, that there’s a point to all of this. We don’t live compassion, or work for justice, or engage mission just for kicks. Jesus doesn’t tell us to do these things just to stay busy. He tells us that the hard stuff is birth pangs. Sadly, too many have framed these passages as fearful and fantastical. But Jesus doesn’t see it that way. Jesus is saying that history is going somewhere. That God is moving us towards something. Jesus sees the end of one

thing as the advent of a new thing. There are some things that you have to believe in order to see. The Kingdom of God is one of those things.

So let me close with another story from *Leadership Magazine*, this one by Gregory L. Fisher, who tells of teaching a class at the West African Bible College. "One day the class was discussing the Second Coming of Christ, and a student asked Fisher a question that took him by surprise. The question was this: "What will Jesus say when he shouts?"

The student said, "Reverend, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 says that Christ will descend from heaven with a loud command. I would like to know what that command will be." Fisher wanted to leave the question unanswered, to tell the student that they must not go past what Scripture has revealed, but his mind wandered to an encounter he had earlier in the day with a refugee from the Liberian civil war. The man, a high school principal, told him how he was apprehended by a two-man death squad. After several hours of terror, as the men described how they would torture and kill him, he somehow narrowly escaped. After hiding in the bush for two days, he was able to find his family and escape to a neighboring country. The escape cost him dearly: two of his children lost their lives. The stark cruelty unleashed on an unsuspecting, undeserving population had touched Fisher deeply. He also saw flashbacks of the beggars that he passed each morning on his way to the office. Every day he saw how poverty destroys dignity, robs people of the best of what it means to be human, and sometimes substitutes the worst of what it means to be an animal. Fisher says even now he is haunted by the vacant eyes of people who have lost all hope.

"Reverend, you have not given me an answer," the student demanded. "What will [Christ] say?"

The question hadn't gone away.

"Enough," Fisher said.

The students looked at one another, surprised to hear their professor cut off conversation so abruptly.

But Fisher continued, "When the Lord returns, He will shout: Enough!"

A look of surprise crossed the face of the student. "What do you mean, enough?"

And Fisher said firmly, "Enough! Enough suffering. Enough starvation. Enough terror. Enough war. Enough death. Enough greed. Enough indignity. Enough lives trapped in hopelessness. Enough sickness and disease. Enough time. Enough! Enough! ENOUGH!" [9 ¶]s adapted from "Second Coming," 1991; as used in "The Good News about the Future" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

I don't know when the end will come. I don't know when enough will finally be enough. But I trust the One who does. Pay attention. Engage. Preach Christ. Live your faith. And by God's grace, my friend, you...are enough! Thanks be to God. Amen.