

Carol Strickland  
 First Presbyterian Church of Athens  
 Lent V, March 29, 2020  
 Text: Mark 13:1-8, 24-37

## The End of the Age

### *Introduction to Scripture Reading*

We started reading through the book of Mark after Christmas. Given our extraordinary circumstances, we went off road the last two Sundays, leaving Mark to attend to other scripture. But today, we are back. We have come to the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. And I need to warn you, that you won't find this chapter in Children's Storybook Bibles. It speaks of the End Times, has symbolic imagery, and a boatload of allusions to Old Testament verses (I counted about 50 in the footnotes of my annotated Bible). It's in the same genre as the book of Revelation and has been dubbed "The Little Apocalypse." It makes us rational 21<sup>st</sup> century Presbyterians nervous and so we usually overlook it. Yet, in the book of Mark it is Jesus' farewell address to his disciples, so we do well to heed it anytime, but I think it speaks importantly to our current time.

So, attend now to God's word. *Mark 13:1-8*. Skipping a section on the future persecution Jesus' disciples will face and a section on an unnamed "desolating sacrilege" and ensuing tribulation, we pick up with v. 24 and read through the end of the chapter. *Mark 13:24-37*. This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

### *Sermon*

I don't know about you, but every time I pick up the newspaper or turn on a newscast, I feel like I am in a science fiction movie. It's surreal. I half expect the undead from "Zombie Apocalypse" to lumber around the corner. Not really, but this mandate to shelter in place going on weeks now is something I never imagined happening. Looking at the same four walls, binging on Netflix, confronted by my long-neglected piles of papers and projects waiting to be addressed can drive a person stir-crazy. Even introverts are feeling lonely, bored, and cabin feverish. And "highly stressed" is the operative descriptor of those who now find themselves home-schooling restless children, not to mention those who are *truly* on the front lines tending to infected patients in hospitals with short supplies, or who themselves have tested positive for Covad 19 or know loved ones who have. It feels surreal.

But we are not the first people who have had "normal" switched off and "abnormal" switched on. Other generations have faced traumatic upheavals. Pandemics like the Spanish flu in 1918 and the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century claimed millions of lives. Wars like World War II and the Civil War imposed terrible hardships and death tolls. Great fires devastated the likes of San Francisco and London. The list of calamities in human history is long. We are not the first to experience turbulent times.

We don't know for sure when and where the Gospel of Mark was written, but many scholars put it around 60 to 70 CE in Rome. There is evidence that the Christian community

there faced persecution for years following the great fire in 64, for which Emperor Nero unjustly blamed the Christians. The historian Tacitus recounts how Christians were punished by being covered with the skins of wild beasts and torn to death by dogs, or crucified on crosses, or burned at night to serve as lamps.<sup>i</sup> This hostile atmosphere might have been what Mark's audience was facing.

Other scholars place Mark's composition among a Christian group near Palestine after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. The Roman armies violently quashed a Jewish rebellion that started in the year 66 and left the Temple, the center of Jewish life, in absolute ruins. Either way, Mark's congregation is part of a tiny minority in the Roman Empire which suffered greatly and wondered how to make sense of the chaos and tribulation.

So, as we heard, Mark 13 begins with one of Jesus' disciples from the Galilean countryside gawking at the Temple, which truly was a sight to behold. The modest temple erected by the exiles that returned from Babylon had been rebuilt by Herod the Great as one of the biggest construction projects of the first century before Christ.

"Look, Teacher, what massive stones and what massive buildings!" The enclosed site was four times as big as the Acropolis in Athens, twice as large as the Roman Forum.<sup>ii</sup> The bit of the retaining wall that still stands today (known as the Wailing Wall) has a stone in it that is over forty feet long and estimated to weigh 275 tons. Herod used so much gold decorating the exterior of the buildings that the historian Josephus said it almost blinded you when the sun shone on it.

And, of course, the religious significance of the Temple was even greater than its imposing physical presence. It was said to be the place where God dwelt.

"Well," Jesus replied. "You see these great stones? Not one will be let standing." The original four disciples, Peter, James, John, and Andrew couldn't wait to ask him about this prediction, which was surely to their ears a harbinger of the End (with a capital "E"). "When?" they wanted to know. "When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" It's a question that has fascinated many: When will the world end?

To Mark's audience, those first century followers of Jesus who lived in constant danger of persecution and who anticipated their Lord's return soon, it was a pressing question indeed.

The "when" question is one that Jesus addresses in this chapter.

And the short answer is, contrary to the soothsayers and prognosticators who claim to know, only God knows. Not only does God know, but God is in charge. The fate of the world is in God's capable hands. Jesus will return. God's kingdom will come, God's will will be done. But when, not to mention how, only God knows.

The other question not voiced, but nevertheless answered in this chapter is, "What are we to do in the meantime?" And especially, What are we to do when our worlds are turned upside down, when normal life is greatly disrupted, when in the words of T. S. Eliot,

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold?

Jesus tells his disciples, in so many words, "Don't panic! Don't get carried away. It will seem like the end but it's not. There will be false prophets and false messiahs claiming to know

the day and time when the curtain will fall on history and God will save the elect. But don't be led astray."

Growing up, we got our eggs from a sweet, white-haired woman in the mountains named Tella Mae. She and her husband Bunny raised chickens in their yard, though every time I saw Bunny he was sitting in his easy chair wearing his faded overalls and only his overalls, while Tella Mae was doing all the work. Anyway, the eggs tasted great because the hens feasted on the vegetable scraps from their garden and the bugs crawling all around. But word was, Tella Mae and Bunny had years before gotten all excited, sold all their possessions, and headed from Virginia all the way to Texas. A radio evangelist was gathering the faithful to meet and prepare for the end of the world. Well, when the appointed day came and went pretty much like any other day, Tella Mae and Bunny came to their senses and headed back home.

In recent days, gun sales have spiked. Fights have broken out in stores over the last roll of toilet paper. Extreme Doomsday preppers have spread fear.

"Do not be alarmed," Jesus said. Instead of over-reacting, calmly trust in the sovereignty of God. Yes, there will be wars, famines, and earthquakes. There will be hurricanes, pandemics, and economic recessions. These, however, are not the end. The God who created the world in love has not abandoned it. This is My Father's World, still, as we sing. In fact, in the midst of terrible troubles, there are birth pangs of new life, Jesus said. Be on the lookout for new life as people come together to work for good, as our compassion for others increases, and as we realize how interconnected we are all on this wondrous planet we share. Don't panic. Instead, trust in the sovereign goodness of God.

While we shouldn't get too excited, Jesus warned that we must not be too apathetic, either. Don't fall asleep at the switch. He tells a little story about a man who goes away, leaves his household, and puts his servants in charge, giving to each his or her work. He orders the doorkeeper to be on watch. Pay attention, he says, because you never know when the master of the household is coming, whether night or day.

God has put us in charge of the household of Earth. We each have work to do, gifts to exercise, resources to share. We dare not be caught napping. We dare not be that student who isn't prepared for the pop quiz.

When I was a brand-new pastor the presbytery assigned me a mentor. I met with this seasoned pastor regularly. I'm sure he counseled me in many wise ways, but the only thing I can recall that he told me was this sage advice: just do your job. When criticism comes, just do your job. When you feel overwhelmed, just do your job. When you don't know what to do, just do your job.

You know what your job is; you hear it here all the time: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself; do justice, love kindness, walk humbly; pray without ceasing; strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering, honor all people. I've seen you do all this and more this week: sewing masks for health care workers, organizing food delivery for the homeless, telephoning homebound members to check on them.

So, when all the world seems to be falling apart, don't panic. Instead trust in the sovereign love of God who is working God's purposes out. And don't fall asleep, either. Instead do the work which God has entrusted you to do.

---

<sup>i</sup> P. 43, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 2 by John Donahue & Daniel Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002)

<sup>ii</sup> P. 167, *Mark* by Douglas Hare, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press: 1996)