

“Good News from Texts of Doom and Gloom”

Mark 13:1–8

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The verses we have read from Mark 13 are a part of what scholars call the “little apocalypse” which sounds odd, but I suppose we’d rather have a little apocalypse than a big one. It is an ancient literary form of which there are two examples of the big variety in scripture – the book of Daniel, from which we have also read a few verses, and the book of Revelation, which we avoid like the plague.

In contrast to prophetic thinking which envisions a way people can shape a better world, with God’s help, apocalyptic thinking assumes the only hope is for God to intervene in a dramatic way to set things right, and the drama inevitably involves catastrophic things like wars and earthquakes. Some people are obsessed with such thinking.

I have a book entitled *The Day and Hour Jesus Will Return* written by a professor at Rutherford College named Colin Deal in 1988. There is no need to go buy it, the predicted date has long since passed. So, either he was wrong, like every other doomsday predictor before him, or we missed it. It’s a bit like a Ziggy cartoon where our friend is sitting in a lounge chair watching television as the caption reads, “Famous psychic predicts world to end at 10:00 P.M. tonight!!... Details at 11:00!

People have been predicting the end of the world for 2,000 years and it hasn’t happened yet. Religious people have been reading the signs in light of their view of scripture, adding up the clues, and coming to conclusions, but none of them has turned out to be right. Thus, with so much time passing, most of us in churches like ours have dismissed this entire mode of thought completely.

We may be worried about the world coming to an end. There is enough violence and warfare to justify that fear, and we might make the earth uninhabitable before we have time to kill each other. But we don’t worry about God intervening and wiping us all out. If the evils of the Holocaust didn’t prompt that, what would?

So, our posture is a bit like what Ron Reagan says in his ads for the Freedom from Religion Foundation, “Ron Reagan, lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell.” We’re not atheists, and we may or may not believe in a literal hell, but we are not afraid of the great apocalypse coming upon us.

So, why would we pay attention to any of these texts of doom and gloom, including our reading from Mark? Well, we’re less than three minutes into a sermon... so you have to figure I have an answer to this question, and I do. It begins with an understanding of the contexts that give rise to apocalyptic writing.

The book of Daniel was probably written around the time when Antiochus Epiphanes, king of the Seleucid Empire, broke with his own culture’s tradition of religious and cultural tolerance, slaughtering many Jewish people and desecrating the temple with the sacrifice of a pig and the worship of Zeus. The book of 2 Maccabees describes these events and the Jewish revolt that ensued in the second century BCE.

The book of Revelation was written in the context of Roman oppression which affected the church directly. Jesus’ words about the temple falling were written by Mark around the time the Romans destroyed the temple during the first Jewish-Roman War.

Apocalyptic books are written in times of great distress, times when it seems there is no hope from a human perspective and thus God must intervene directly. Furthermore, the details concern actors at the time of the writing in veiled form, not predictions of future people and nations. So, the writings named are talking about the Seleucids and Romans, not the Russians and Iranians. But the question is, “Are there times when our life situation resembles this sort of context?” If there are, apocalyptic thinking may have something to offer us.

Those living during The Civil War must have felt like they were living in the end times, as must those who lived through World War I and World War II, and World War I raged at the same time as a pandemic that took 50 million lives. We may not have experienced anything this traumatic, but the terrorist attacks of 9-11 jolted us, COVID was suffocating and its consequences continue to plague us in ways very few

people understand. Most Americans understand economics about as well as they do civics or history, which is to say, not very well.

But even if none of these realities rises to the level of apocalyptic concern, what people are experiencing in Gaza, Israel, and Ukraine does. The impact of climate change falls into this category as well, even if we haven't felt its full force yet; we will, rest assured, the flooding of our mountains is not a one-off event. And in addition to all these realities, sometimes our personal experience feels so utterly desolate as to cause us to sing the old Hee Haw song "Doom, Despair and Agony on Me," well, at least some of us it does, some are too young to remember this cultural gem...

William Butler Yeats wrote a poem entitled "The Second Coming" that sums up the feeling in a slightly more refined way.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

This is how we sometimes feel. The center cannot hold. Innocence is drowned.

So, what does apocalyptic thinking have to offer us when we are in such a place of life? Let's take a closer look at our text. It begins with Jesus and the disciples walking out of the temple and the disciples saying, "Look, Teacher, what large stones, and what large buildings!" The style of speech sounds like Little Red Riding Hood saying, "Grandma, what big teeth you have!" But the tone is different.

They are in awe. The temple is the center of faith and public life, it is a sign of all that it is sacred. It is like our sanctuary, state and national capitals, and Wall Street all rolled into one. And Jesus says, "No stone will be left upon another..." In other words, it's all coming down... the building and all that goes with it.

This statement is so jolting that the disciples cannot speak a word in open about it. They wait until they are on the Mount of Olives where Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Jesus privately, almost in a whisper, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”

Jesus says later in this chapter that even he doesn’t know when it will all happen (v. 32). He warns them not to pay attention to imposters who come in his name, and not to get excited about wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, and famines, all the things people usually view as signs that the end is near. It is not the end, no matter how many people think it is, he says. This is all just the beginning of the birth pangs, the start of a new age, the relentless crying out for something better.

I think of the words of an old spiritual slaves who held on to this Christian hope sang.

Oh, freedom, Oh, freedom,
Oh, freedom over me.
And before I’d be a slave
I’ll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.

That is the kind of faith Jesus calls his followers to embrace, one that will not accept less than God intends, one that holds on to hope even in contexts of great struggle.

So, what is the message for us? It is not a calling to predict the end, much less to hasten the day. It is a calling to practice patience and perseverance, trusting that God is in control and thus the good and the right will ultimately prevail.

Patience is a word we don’t like, even as children. We don’t like waiting for basic things we want and need, much less setting things right in this world where so much seems to be going wrong. But Christian waiting is not simply allowing time to pass. It is trusting God with the future, and in light of this trust, realizing that our efforts are not in vain.

It is Good News from a doom and gloom text; it is a word of hope, not cause for fear; and it offers us a clear course of action – not to gaze

up into the skying looking for Jesus' return or to obsess over certain biblical texts so as to determine exactly when Jesus will return, but to immerse ourselves in loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Yesterday was a marvelous example of faithfulness to this calling. The wonder of Toy Joy is a year-long effort for the planners, it grows out of our clothing ministry and relationships that are formed there, and it's not just about toys but food and books and friendship.

But through it all, love is extended to nearly 1,000 people, counting all in the families; people of different ethnicities, people who speak different languages, people from different religious backgrounds; and love and joy and purpose are experienced among all who serve. It is a foretaste of our eternal destiny, a present-day experience of the beloved community, a prime example of what we are called to be and do in light of God's control of the future.

Toy Joy is not the only way we live out this calling. We do so through the clothing ministry, the food truck, Rise Against Hunger, the Crop Walk, the dental bus, work on Habitat houses. We will do so through becoming a White Flag shelter, housing the homeless on bitter cold nights. And in addition to every practical response to human need, we fulfill our calling to love our neighbor through advocacy work in the public realm on behalf of vulnerable people who cannot speak for themselves, when we accomplish our goals and when we do not.

Battles are won and lost in the great cosmic struggle between good and evil. In many ways, it seems like we are losing ground — racism is on the rise, the stranger in our land is being treated with hostility, we still do not value women as equal, and things like honesty, character, and decency don't seem to matter. But we know how the war will end. Good prevails, justice abounds, God wins in the end.

This is the simple message of complicated apocalyptic imagery in books like Revelation and in texts like the one we have read today from Mark — God wins! It may not immediately fix all that is wrong about the present moment, but it is enough to keep us invested in the sacred work we are called to do.