

Sunday, November 14, 2021 – “Jesus Gets Real”  
– Bible Study & Reflection on Mark 13:1-8

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Mark 13:1-8 (*Common English Bible*).

<sup>1</sup> As Jesus left the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Teacher, look! What awesome stones and buildings!”

<sup>2</sup> Jesus responded, “Do you see these enormous buildings? Not even one stone will be left upon another. All will be demolished.”

<sup>3</sup> Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives across from the temple. Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup> “Tell us, when will these things happen? What sign will show that all these things are about to come to an end?”

<sup>5</sup> Jesus said, “Watch out that no one deceives you. <sup>6</sup> Many people will come in my name, saying, ‘I’m the one!’ They will deceive many people. <sup>7</sup> When you hear of wars and reports of wars, don’t be alarmed. These things must happen, but this isn’t the end yet. <sup>8</sup> Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other, and there will be earthquakes and famines in all sorts of places. These things are just the beginning of the sufferings associated with the end.

At this time of the year, as we stand on the threshold of the ending of the Church’s liturgical year, just before the season of Advent, the lectionary (and Mark 13) encourages us to come to terms with the apocalyptic “end of the world” Jesus. In theology, there’s a whole branch of study devoted to apocalyptic literature known as “eschatology,” the study of “last things.” Right at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus apocalyptically announced the coming reign of God. The coming of God into the world is a mix of good news and bad news, of grace and judgment, of fear and hopefulness. In the synoptic Gospels, curiously, it’s the demons who first figure out who Jesus is: the Holy One of God who comes to shake the world to its foundations, to shift the cosmos back to God.

In this Sunday’s appointed Gospel Reading, the disciples note the size of the Jerusalem Temple’s huge stones. Jesus predicts the utter destruction of the Temple. Then Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask for a date of this prophesied destruction. Jesus does not answer.

In Mark 13:32, Jesus says that no one knows the date of the downfall of the Temple. The time of this ending will be accompanied by war, earthquakes, and famine. Right there, our lesson ends.

In refusing to answer his disciples’ request for predictions and assurances, Jesus shifts the discussion from questions about “when,” to deeper theological questions of “What does this mean?” Jesus urges his followers to “Watch out!” in the warning that begins in this passage (Mark 13:5) and then is reiterated in Mark 13:9, 23, and 33. Mark 13 ends with a story about a man who heads out on a journey. While the owner of the house is away, keep alert, keep watching.

There is an undeniable threat surrounding this apocalyptic discourse. If we thought that Jesus was simply a wonderful rabbinic teacher, a prophet who gives moral instruction, a lover of children and a healer of the sick, we’d better think again. As we move toward Advent, this Sunday’s Gospel lection pushes us to rise above petty, moralistic prescriptions for human behavior or even uplifting spiritual thoughts and dare to consider the cosmic, ultimate purposes

of God. God is about to work grand, cosmological transformation. God's work will shake the heavens and the earth and cannot be contained in our manageable spiritual categories.

Apocalyptic eschatology rises above our humanistic, anthropological religions that so often degenerate into mere sentimental moralizing. God is at work beyond human activity or imagining. The future is not in our hands, but rather in God's hands. Thank God! If people come to church for a boost to be on their best behavior, or that church is a place where folks hear appeals to their "better angels," then Jesus' talk of the dismantling, rebuilding work of God may come as a jolt.

Underneath all of this apocalyptic language is the affirmation that our salvation is what God does, not what we produce. What we need most is not more earnest human striving. We need a God who does not abandon us to our own devices. We need a God who moves heaven and earth to save us. That salvation by God will not be painless nor will it be cheap, implies Jesus as he teaches about the outworking of the purposes of God.

Just beyond this week's Gospel, Jesus assumes that Peter, James, John, and Andrew will still be around when these things occur. Mark 13:9 predicts that the disciples will be handed over to councils and will need to bear courageous witness. There will be pain. The disciples ask for signs and dates, and Jesus speaks of the end of the age: wars, famines, earthquakes. By the time we get to verses 24-26, Jesus speaks of the collapse of the heavens and the coming of the awesome "Human One" ("Son of Man").

What can all of this apocalyptic talk mean for us as we live in an uncertain world that seems to be on the brink of collapse? Could it be that the future may involve suffering and pain because what God is doing is large, infinite, and cosmic? Perhaps our usual positivistic thoughts and sentimental bromides will not do when we listen to Jesus' apocalyptic words. Maybe his words seem all too real, too close to home. It's a good thing to realize that God is working God's purposes out. Whether we acknowledge or not is quite another thing.

I close with the words of hymn writer Arthur C. Ainger whose lyrics echo the words of the prophet Habakkuk (2:14):

God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year:  
 God is working his purpose out, the time is drawing near.  
 Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,  
 When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

All we can do is nothing worth unless God blesses the deed.  
 Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God gives life to the seed.  
 Yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,  
 When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

That is our hope! So be it! Amen & Amen!!!

Blessings,

Pastor Greg Rupright

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