

Our lectionary reading leads us steadily toward the end of the Gospel of Mark. This Sunday's scripture and next draw our focus toward the future where Christ reigns. Today's scripture passage happens immediately after Jesus commenting on the Widow's Mite in the temple – that was last week's sermon. Chapter 13, where our passage today is found, is sometimes called the Markan Apocalypse. (Salt Project) And, before I read it, let me remind you about what Apocalypse means and what is an apocalyptic text.

We often think of apocalypse as a “catastrophe at the end of the world.” But here we are wrong. A catastrophe at the end of the world is a eschatological apocalypse – where eschatology refers to “in the fullness of time” “In that day” or “At the end.”

Apocalypse is from the Greek *Apokalypsis* which means “to be revealed or uncovered, a revelation.”

Apocalyptic writing occurs in the Old Testament – like in Daniel, in the New Testament – like in Revelation, and it also occurs here. John J. Collins defines apocalyptic writing or literature as a genre in which God “reveals hidden truths to a human recipient” and the recipient – or the writer - seeks to interpret present day life through the lens of the divine. (Lewis, 17)”

It's a bit like an epiphany. Suddenly things that were unknown or hidden from our mere mortal bodies, are now made plain. It's an insight into the purpose of the Divine. So, keep this in mind as I read to you today's word from the Gospel of Mark.

We read:

Mark 13:1-8

**13** As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”<sup>2</sup> Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

<sup>3</sup> When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,<sup>4</sup> “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”<sup>5</sup> Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray.<sup>6</sup> Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.<sup>7</sup> When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.<sup>8</sup> 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.

It is important to think about the setting of this text before we get into the nitty gritty. And, while the scripture takes us outside the temple and onto the Mount of Olives, the greater setting of the Gospel of Mark is more important. The Gospel of Mark was “(likely) written during (or just after) the disastrous Jewish revolt against Roman imperial occupation in Palestine (66 – 70 CE). Mark's world was shattered and shaken to its core. The Roman armies vanquished the rebellion and destroyed the Jewish temple, desecrating what for Jews was nothing less than the sacred heart of the world. The message of Mark's Gospel (was for them) a message of hope proclaimed in the midst of catastrophe, grace in the midst of violence and ruin. (Salt Project)”

For Mark, the Gospel is the hope that rings out when all hope seems lost. To really hear it (and begin to make sense of these words), we have to listen from the perspective of people having suffered a great loss. We may want to put ourselves in the place of a first century AD new Christian or, if we're able,

place ourselves into the perspective of one who, today, is in “a position of desolation, chaos, and bewilderment...

(The Gospel of Mark is the Gospel which walks) alongside the traumatized soldier, the displaced illegal refugee, the pregnant teenager, the addict and his heartbroken family, the activist discouraged by a significant setback. This is where Mark lives. (Salt Project)”

From these depths Mark’s Jesus proclaims the good news. And yes, to such as these, hearing that God **is** on the move within the birth pangs of a new age IS VERY good news.

Because we already know what apocalypse means, it is also important to say that, while this is an apocalyptic text Jesus is not talking about End Times. It would certainly be lovely if he were, because then we would know what to look out for. We could see the signs – interpret them – and then we would know how long we have.

If you read all of Mark 13 you will see that Jesus is distinctly ambiguous. He does NOT tell the disciples when things will happen, even after they ask. Instead, he throws out the calendar. “It doesn’t matter when it happens, it matters that it is/will happen. (BCBC, 302)”

When we delve into this text then we can see – perhaps then you could say we have an apocalyptic encounter – that what Jesus says is not about signs and timetables but about discernment; judging what we see and experience in our present world in the light of Christ. In short, it is about faithful discipleship. (BCBC, 301)

We can ask, what are the buildings? When will this happen? Who are these false “gods”? What will the “child” of the birth pangs be? But perhaps instead of interpreting these apocalyptic texts to fit our own North American Life into, what if we don’t speculate on what’s going to happen in the latter days, and instead, like Jesus says, “Beware” or *Be aware* lest you be lead astray.”

Jesus says that the temple will be destroyed. Many false prophets will come and there will be wars (like there always are) and famines and earthquakes (like there always are) and great suffering (like there always is). But this is nothing but the labour pains of a new era coming.

Just last week Bryce preached on the Widows Mite. In this account Jesus had just urged the disciples to see past impressive exteriors. People who were honoring God were not the rich, flamboyantly throwing portions of their wealth into the treasury. (12:41-44). Similarly, here in today’s text, the disciples gazed with admiration at the huge stones and impressive decorations of the temple; yet Jesus saw through the exterior to its desecration and doom. (BCBC, 304)

We know that, while the temple was important, it was not God’s only dwelling place.

The church too is more than just a building. Menno is more than just a building. Are our eyes opened to see beyond our immediate surroundings. Are we Aware that the struggles facing the church and Christians in North America may in fact be “birth pangs” leading to new life? (Salt Project)

What happens when the walls of the church come tumbling down? What happens to our faith when the traditional structures break apart? What will our eyes behold then?

Will we be open to exploring new ways of worshipping together? Who will we welcome and who will we exclude? Are we aware of the new things being born among us? Do we welcome or exclude the new life? New thought? New ideas? New leaders? What new places of worship will spring forth? What new gatherings will be born? What is being birthed?

We can see already that the church in North America is changing – not just the Mennonite church. We do not yet know what form this new child – the church – will take. Zoom, YouTube, wild-church, small-groups, intentional communities, Sunday afternoon walks, book-clubs, mom’s groups, cooking class, community outreach.

In the Believers Church Bible Commentary Timothy J Geddert, New Testament Professor Emeritus from Fresno Pacific, writes that none of Jesus’ list of situations arising in the future are to be viewed as signs of the end times. He says, “Deceivers, however, will come along and claim that these are sure signs that the End has arrived.”

Gedert continues, “They will also make a preposterous claim about themselves, a claim literally translated *I AM* (v. 6). This is the Greek translation for Yahweh (cf. 6:50; 14:62; Exod. 3:14). Perhaps the deceivers are claiming divinity. Alternatively, they may be claiming, “I am Jesus (returned)” or “I am the Messiah (and Jesus was not).”

Whatever their claim, the disciples are to stand firm in their allegiance to Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. He is the one destined to return as the Son of Man. (BCBC, 307)”

Are our eyes opened and are we able to see and name and avoid falling into the trap of idols and false prophets claiming to be the savior coming “in my name” Jesus says?

When we are aware – when we see what is really going on in our midst, then we see that worshipping popular idols – be they people or possessions - leads us away from God’s kingdom. Indeed, false prophets and those claiming to save will lead people away from God’s kingdom and toward the opposite behaviour and thoughts.

Scripture is rife with stories and accounts of God’s kingdom. When we hold our world and what we love up alongside what Jesus taught, then we can see clearly what lines up.

What of our life and the way we live lines up to what Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God? Do we bless the meek? Do we comfort the sick and the grieving? Do the ones we follow shelter the orphan? Provide a home for the homeless and the disenfranchised? Do they provide hospitality to the stranger? Instead of a sword, do they work for peace?

In verses 7 and 8, Jesus reminds his disciples that hard times, wars, famines and earthquakes are also not signs signaling the arrival of the end times. There are likely just as many – if not maybe less wars now than there were back when Jesus was walking on the earth. However, because we know so much of what is going on in the world, it seems as though there is much more fighting – perhaps, though, our wars are bigger and involve mass destruction of people, geography and cultures. We have still not learned in 2000 years the things that make for peace.

In his commentary, Geddert says, “Then as now, wars provide especially fruitful contexts for (end times) apocalyptic speculation. In time of war, especially religious war, speculation thrives as to who will be the Messiah delivering an oppressed people, and who will be the “antichrist” opposing all that is good and right. Neither wars nor the deceivers who capitalize on them are to cause great alarm. War is a fearful thing, but it is not a sign of the end time, says Jesus. (BCBC, 309)”

Famines, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, monsoons, climate change, drought, “Do not be alarmed! (v. 7). Here the word we translate as “do not be alarmed,” “*May Throw-εο*” “μή θροέω” means do not be stirred to fear. We could also say, “Don’t get too excited!” This is not the end. Jesus says, such things have always occurred and will continue to occur. They are not to be understood that the end is nigh.

In fact, none of these things – the temple being destroyed, deceivers claiming to be saviors, even wars and natural disasters – Jesus says none of these are to be understood as signs of the End. Instead, they are events that characterize the world in which we, the followers of Christ, will live in faithful service (BCBC, 310, 327).

The Challenge of living in “these birthing times” is to Be Aware. Many Christians have misused apocalyptic texts like this, and, as a result, see “only evil in this world and wait desperately for some miraculous divine intervention to rescue them from it.

But Christ calls us to Be Aware. This means being aware not only of the “signs of the times” and those who would deceive us and would draw us into fear but being aware of what lies beneath these times – and that is that God’s kingdom is even here where life is hard.

Why? So that we would not lose hope. So that we can encourage each other. So that we can see that there is still goodness in our world. So that we can truly see our neighbour as a Child of God. So that we can Be Aware of the needs of others. So that we are not found to be asleep when the spirit of God presents itself to us in need of a pair of shoes on a cold Winnipeg street.

#### Sources Cited

Geddert, Timothy J. “The Beginning of the End.” In *Mark: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, 300–327. Scottdale, PA: MennoMedia, 2001.

Lewis, Scott M. “The Mother of All Theology.” In *What Are They Saying About New Testament Apocalyptic*, 17. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004.

Myer, Elizabeth. “Birth Pangs: Salt’s Commentary for Twenty-Sixth Week after Pentecost.” SALT Project, November 11, 2024. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-sixth-week-after-pentecost>.

Reynolds, Lindor. “Sep 2012: Opinion: Hey, Winnipeg, Do Something.” Winnipeg Free Press, September 19, 2012. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2012/09/19/hey-winnipeg-do-something>.