

IT ISN'T OVER YET

**Sermon Preached by The Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 16
Mark 13:1-8

It is the season of Thanksgiving, and you may have noticed that this morning's gospel text is not an obvious fit with that gentle holiday. In fact, on the surface, it's a pretty grim text for any Sunday of the year. Jesus leaves the temple for the last time before he is condemned to death and predicts its complete destruction. He is asked by the first four disciples whom he had called when this destruction will occur and what signs will announce it. In the discourse that follows (and which continues beyond what we read this morning, through the end of chapter 13), Jesus speaks of the end of the temple, the end of all things and the glorious coming of the Son of Man to gather his own.

It is heavy stuff: concerned with catastrophe and apocalypse, with the destruction of holy buildings, with wars, earthquakes, and famines. You may be thinking, we get enough of that sort of thing on the evening news; we don't really need more of it in church. Where is the gospel—the good news—in Mark 13? Why spend our time on it at all?

When you're considering difficult texts in the Bible, it's always important to step back, to consider the larger context in which they appear. The 13th chapter of Mark's gospel takes place during the final week of Jesus' life.¹ In the first twelve chapters, we've had Mark's entire, fast-paced narrative of Jesus' ministry: his baptism by John in the Jordan, his gathering of the disciples, his preaching, teaching and healing in Galilee, his mounting conflicts with the religious authorities as he travels to Jerusalem. Jesus has taught in parables, fed over 5,000 with the lunch of one little boy, and calmed stormy seas. Now—at this point in the story—his ministry basically is completed. He has come to Jerusalem and again angered the temple officials by driving out the money changers, criticizing the scribes who are so impressed with their position that they overlook their duty, and castigating those who would take the widow's mite for their own purposes instead of using it for God's glory. So, now comes chapter 13, before Mark plunges into the events of the Passion. In chapter 14, Jesus will be arrested. In chapter 15, he will be crucified. In chapter 16, he will be resurrected. Well, not exactly. Mark's gospel comes to an abrupt ending, you may remember, as frightened women flee silently from the empty tomb. There is no resurrection appearance by Jesus, merely a call for the disciples to reassemble with him in Galilee.

It has been suggested that the puzzling incompleteness of Mark's gospel may actually be explained by chapter 13: in other words, the final climactic events of this "good news of Jesus Christ,"² that Mark is reporting are yet to occur. As remarkable as

¹ Cf. Matthew 24 and Luke 21.

² Mark 1:1.

the Jesus event has been—turning the world as it was upside down—Mark is telling us, it isn't over yet.

As you may know, the temple in Jerusalem was one of the most impressive sights in the world in Jesus' day. As chapter 13 opens, one of Jesus' disciples, agog at the size of the stones being used for temple construction, bubbles over with amazement and awe: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" What they are looking at is in fact the third temple to stand on Temple Mount since King Solomon first built a temple there a thousand years earlier. It had been destroyed by the Babylonians and then rebuilt following the Hebrews' return from exile. King Herod the Great had razed that Second Temple and begun his massive rebuilding project before Jesus was born and it was not yet finished. So Jesus and the four disciples are speaking that day of the beauty and destruction of a brand new building.

And what a building it was! It was a staggeringly large and opulent edifice, one unlikely to come down again. The temple had a perimeter circumference of two-thirds of a mile. Its marble walls stood 150 feet high and were constructed of blocks weighing many tons. The outside of the building was decorated with 40-foot-high columns of white marble. There were ten gates by which to enter the temple's outer courts, each covered in silver or gold plate. Two of the doors stood 45 feet in height, and one gate in particular, known as the Beautiful Gate, was cast of Corinthian bronze. The eastern front of the temple and part of the side walls were plated with gold. The gleaming white marble and stunning metal work made the temple flash in the Middle Eastern sun and dominate the cityscape. But perhaps most important of all, the temple was the religious and psychological center of the Jewish nation. It was a powerful symbol of the people's identity and hopes for the future.

I can certainly relate to the awe that Jesus' disciples felt. I lived in New York City for more than 25 years, but I never stopped gazing at the skyscrapers and wondering at how that remarkable city has been built up from a wilderness in just several hundred years. What a monument to human industry and ingenuity and the power of compound interest! There is such wealth and power and creativity concentrated on Manhattan Island! I never tired of looking out over the skyline from our apartment building in Brooklyn Heights. It is mesmerizing. Yes, I can relate to what the disciples were feeling that day long ago in Jerusalem.

Jesus, of course, was not impressed with that outward splendor and display of strength. He is not concerned with bricks and mortar. He is disturbed by the misrepresentation of what is godly. Jesus sees beyond the flashy facade to the hollow core of the religious leaders' faith. "This whole place will come tumbling down one day soon," he tells the four disciples, the inner circle, the first four to put down what they were doing and follow him. But they continue to press their questioning. They want him to tell them *when*. How will they know when the center of their universe is about to blow?

That is when he tells them about the dismantling of the sky, how the stars will fall from their constellations like diamonds from a broken necklace, how the sun will be smudged and the moon snuffed out before they see the Son of Man riding the clouds with great power and glory. He does not say it to scare them. He says it to comfort them. They

need to know that even something as frightening as the end of the world is in God's good hands. When the cosmos collapses and every light in the sky is put out, they are to remember what he has told them. They are to remember that God is sovereign over darkness as well as light and they are to watch—watch even in the darkness—for his coming to them in the clouds.

By the time Mark wrote Jesus' words down some forty years later, it seemed that the end was very near. The stars were still in the sky, but that was about all. The headlines were as bad then as they are now. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple was destroyed. The emperor's favorite pastime was thinking up inventive new ways for Christians to die and there was fighting among the Christians themselves, with whole families being torn apart by their conflicting loyalties. False messiahs were setting themselves up on every street corner, each of them claiming exclusive access to the mind of God. Everything was falling apart, and those who had believed in Jesus must have wondered if they had been fooled. Surely this was not the way things were supposed to turn out. Surely God had intended a nonviolent renovation of the world—a sort of huge urban renewal project—with loyal believers in charge. Not this chaos. Not this outrage. Not this darkness.

That is when Mark told them—and us—the story again, writing it down so they would not forget: how Jesus himself had predicted it all, how he had tried to tell them that they could not have a new world without letting go of the old one, which would have to crash and burn before anything fresh could be born in its ashes. It was and is the good news of the end of the world, a piece of the gospel most of us would just as soon forget, but there it is: when the end comes, it will not be because God is absent but because God is very present, having come in great power and glory to make all things new.

In the meantime, our job is to watch, Jesus says—not to watch out, but to watch—to stay alert, to pay attention, so that we are not snoozing when the master comes home. There are at least three different ways Christians have gone about this job in years past. For some, watching means looking for the literal end of the world. There are whole books you can buy on the mathematical formulae contained in the book of Revelation, with good advice about how to be in the right place at the right time. The only problem with this approach is that it tries to discover what even Jesus himself could not discover. "Truly," he said, "this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." And yet with his next breath he took it back. "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Some people say that phrase was added much later, after generations and generations of believers had passed away and those who were left wanted to know what the delay was all about, but if Jesus was fully human, it was true: even he did not know the mind of God.

Another way Christians have settled down to watch is by letting their awareness of the end heighten their commitment to the present. The story is told how in colonial New England, a meeting of state legislators was plunged into darkness by a sudden eclipse, during which many of those present panicked and others moved to adjourn. But one of them said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought."

Yet a third way to watch for the end is to suspect that there is not just one end to the world any more than there is just one coming of Christ to look forward to. When Jesus died, his disciples believed the world had ended. When Jerusalem fell and Nero swooped down on the young church like a mad vulture, they believed the world had ended. In a manner of speaking, the world can end any day of the week with a declaration of war, or the death of a child, or a grim diagnosis, and watching for Christ's coming again in power and great glory can become the only light in such times, when sun and moon and stars seem all to have been snuffed out.

Whichever of these ways makes the most sense to you, they have one thing in common. The one who is coming is not an enemy but a friend. He may come in the light, but he may also come in the evening, or at midnight, or at three in the morning. Darkness does not stop him, and it does not have to stop us either. Our job is not to lie in bed with pillows over our heads or to shove all the heavy furniture in front of the door for fear of the darkness outside. Our job is to light a candle and set it in the window. Our job is to watch for the one who comes to us with healing in his wings and to open the door for him before he raises his hand to knock. Who knows when that will be? No one, that is who. So, watch. Take heed. Watch.

Happily, we can do our watching together. We can do it in this community of candle-lighters we call the church. We can reassure one another when the darkness seems to be drawing closer, threatening to smother the light. We can remind one another, through our worship and our work and our sharing in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, that we belong to God, that we have been freed from sin and death and united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. And we can give thanks—on Thanksgiving Day, to be sure, but also on every day—that God gives us breath: Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.

To the Lord our God, alpha and omega, be all glory and honor for ever. Amen.