

Sermon for Sunday, March 17, 2024

Mark 13:1-8 and 24-37

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is a joy-filled day as we witness Ava Stehr's affirmation of faith. For that reason I have a tickle of regret that our Scripture lesson seems to be filled with gloom and doom. On the other hand, I will dare to claim that it is fortuitous to have this opportunity to preach on the topic of the apocalypse. I'm going to spend some time today talking about the word's meaning, and the context during which this gospel passage was written. Then I'm going to expand on Jesus' teaching about how we are called to live. Finally, I'm going to remind you all of God's promises. The most important of which is that we are claimed by God and that nothing can separate us from God and God's love. *(Pause)*

Today's Scripture reading is sometimes referred to as Mark's "little apocalypse." What is an apocalypse? It's a Jewish or Christian writing filled with symbolic imagery. The primary point of an apocalyptic writing is to communicate the "expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom." These words are a mouthful! What do these words mean in simple terms?

When the word apocalypse is used in 2024, it usually means that the speaker/writer thinks that the end of the world as we know it is about to occur. That the wars and famines that we hear about on the news are signs predicting that God is going to return soon. But that's not what Jesus said.

What Jesus said is that these occurrences are simply the beginning. Everything that is going on in our world: the wars in Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza; the rioting in Haiti, the starving children in Gaza; as horrific as all of these occurrences are; these are not signs that the return of God is imminent. One brief look at either US history or world history and you will discover that there have often been wars and rumors of wars in the last 2000 years. Some of these wars engulfed the entire world. Famine happened. And still, God has not returned.

Our best understanding is that the gospel of Mark was written sometime between 66 CE and 74 CE which is roughly when a

Jewish uprising against the Roman army occurred in Israel. The end result of the uprising was that Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. At the least the times were frightening and disrupted. Undoubtedly some thought that God's return was going to be very soon as they witnessed the horrible things that happened in Israel at that time. Christians were as concerned as anyone about rumors of war, battles, scarcity of food and water, and literally staying alive.

Today's Scripture lesson from Jesus is intended to address the frightening times that he knew early Christians would face. In it he teaches that "the Son of Man" aka Jesus, is going to return with great power and glory. But we humans seem deeply prone to think that this means in a war-like stance. That Jesus' return will include a certain level of violence. Returning with great power and glory simply means that there will be no doubt about his identity when he returns. We will know. It will be obvious and unquestionable. But it will not necessarily be violent.

We humans frequently fall into a common trap: we want to try to figure out just when Jesus is going to return. We want to know when the apocalypse is going to occur—probably so that we can avoid living in a manner that we think is the right way to follow God until the very last minute. That's part of our human nature—I'll change my life and my style of living; I'll be a better Christian—tomorrow.

Jesus warns us about living like this. He compares us to the slaves of a homeowner who leaves on a journey. The slaves have no idea when the homeowner will return so they are expected to be always on task. We should see ourselves in just the same way. When we say we are followers of Jesus; we should consider ourselves to be like slaves to him.

Ava, you told me that you and Julia work for Riverside Services, a group home provider here in Goodhue County. You also said that sometimes you work on Sundays. I trust that you are very responsible employees. You are part of a team that has responsibilities for caring for the residents of the home. You really can't avoid going to work because the residents will suffer mightily if you aren't there. If you mess up, you will ultimately have to report to the executive director; right? This is a real world example of what Jesus is talking about when he talks about a man going on a journey; leaving home and putting his slaves in charge. No, you are not a slave. But you DO have responsibilities; and those responsibilities have been given to you by Riverside Services. They

trust that you will fulfill your responsibilities even when the boss isn't there.

It's the same way for all of us. We have been given responsibilities by God. It begins with our body: we need to take care of it. Then it's our possessions, our homes, perhaps a bit of land, farmland, maybe a business. God's charge to us is to manage those responsibilities so that those under our care flourish and thrive. Because we don't know when the master will return.

If you are busy trying to figure out exactly when the master will return; or put another way: when the "apocalypse" is going to happen—you become susceptible to manipulation. Many are the stories of people who have been convinced by a charismatic leader that he knows the day and the time. That's utter balderdash. Jesus issued a warning in this passage, "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." Even Jesus did not know the day or the hour. So when you hear someone assert something like, "Jesus is coming soon." you must recognize that they really don't know.

So, what are we to do when we get scared; when we hear these rumors that "the end of the world is coming?" We must remind ourselves over and over that no one knows. NO ONE! Jesus said so.

There is marvelously reassuring news embedded within today's Scripture lesson and it's easy to overlook. The Son of Man (Jesus) is going to return, yes, and he is going to gather his elect. This gathering should be considered a gentle image; and most assuredly not a violent one. No one will be overlooked. The angels are going to spread out to the ends of the earth so that all will be brought to God's heavenly home. Who are God's elect? We are! In our baptisms we are adopted into God's family. Nothing, and no one can separate us from God and from God's love. The apostle Paul wrote it beautifully in Romans 8:38-39 when he says, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is our good news for today.

Remember these things:

- Wars, rumors of wars, unrest and famine are not signs that the world is about to end. These are signs of the brokenness of our world.

- No one knows when the end of this world will occur. Jesus said that even he did not know.
- You are one of God's elect. You have nothing to fear for nothing can separate you from God's love.
- We are, however, called to be responsible for that which God has given us. These responsibilities are for the betterment of the people and the world around us.

I close today with another reading from Scripture: Ephesians 2:8-9
8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast.