

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/03/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

First Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, December 3rd

Mark 13:24-37

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Knowing the end of the story

This is the First Sunday of Advent and the first Sunday Gospel lection of the new liturgical year. As the lectionary year transitions from Year A to Year B, the primary Gospel focus transitions from Matthew to Mark. As we move from the long season after Pentecost to Advent, the Gospel lections shift from the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world and the calling we have as disciples to continue the work of Christ to a realization that, despite the best intentions of the people of God to do the work of the Kingdom, the Kingdom will never be fully consummated until Christ returns. Thus, Advent begins with a sense of hope within such hopelessness – a sense of both awe and thanksgiving as we anticipate the Second Coming of Jesus.

Mark 13:24-37 Commentary

This section of Mark is taken from chapter 13 which is often referred to as the “Little Apocalypse.” While apocalyptic literature (literally *unveiling* or *revelation*) may appear strange to us, it is usually associated with times of oppression and persecution and reveals God’s actions and coming judgment as time moves forward to when God will bring history to an end. This literary genre proclaims a message of hope in a coded language using vivid imagery and symbols which is only understandable by insiders. The chapter begins with a comment by one of the disciples about how large were the stones and how wonderful were the buildings in the temple complex, the center of Jewish worship. Jesus responds by predicting the absolute destruction of this complex (13:1-2). Peter, James, and John in a private audience with Jesus ask for details – when will this happen and what will the signs be (vv.3-4). Jesus begins a lengthy discourse that addresses both the impending crisis and the end of time.

The lectionary itself can be divided into three sections: a prophecy regarding the return of the Son of Man (vv.24-27), the lesson of the fig tree and the impending crisis (vv.28-31), and the need to be alert (vv.32-37).

²⁴ *“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,*
²⁵ *and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.* ²⁶ *And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.* ²⁷ *And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

The previous verses (vv.5-23) point to the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of time, the “*but*” (*alla*) in v.24 suggests vv.24-27 refer only to the latter. “*In those days*” also has strong eschatological associations. The vivid imagery presented here is straight from the Old Testament: Joel 2:10; Deuteronomy 30:3; Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Daniel 7:13. The second coming of Jesus will be associated with cosmic events. It will be unmistakable.

²⁸ *“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Earlier in the chapter the disciples asked for a sign (v.4). Jesus now provides an answer in the form of a mini parable. Alas, this is a notoriously difficult passage with many interpretations. Unlike many trees in the region, the fig tree loses its leaves in the fall and begins to grow new leaves at the approach of summer. A fig tree putting out new leaf is an encouraging sign that summer is not far off. *“These things taking place”* (v. 29) are thus a sure sign of what is imminent. The interpretation of this passage hinges on the meaning of *“all these things”* (v.30) and *“this generation”* (v.30). Most scholars believe *“these things”* (v.29) refers to the earlier events not described in the lectionary (vv.5-23) and thus *“all these things”* (v.30) includes the destruction of the temple. The destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 meant the Second Coming could be imminent with the other associated signs. The delay so far should be considered as a sign of grace. In v.31, Jesus claims His words are more endearing than creation. So far, His words have outlived tyrants attempting to eliminate Christianity in the preceding two millennia and have stood while worldly kingdoms and empires have come and gone.

³² *“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”*

The third section of the lectionary reading is also another mini parable. Simply put, despite the signs given earlier, the precise timing of the Second Coming is known only to God. As a result, Jesus’ disciples must remain ever vigilant. The doorkeeper did not know what time in the night his master would return.

Reflection and Application

Many Christians in the West tend to ignore the apocalyptic literature. It is perhaps not surprising since this genre is not an integral part of our culture. Yet as we enter Advent in 2023, we do not need to be convinced we are in what seems to be a period of perpetual crisis. We do not need to be persuaded how broken our world is. At home, the implications of deep social change continue to transform our society. Such deep change is rarely painless. Abroad we are perhaps seeing the end of the *Pax Americana*; an end of a period of relative global stability not seen since the end of the Second World War. Many have argued how the global conditions seem eerily like those that led up to the First World War. Some see similarities to the breakdown of former empires of old. Others argue all this is a moot point since the world will be destroyed at any minute through environmental catastrophe. How dare anyone have hope?

Many of us are thus entering this Advent with an increasing awareness that despite our best efforts to transform the world through the Gospel, the world is becoming more broken. It is at this low point do we realize that we are totally dependent upon God and His timing. It is the season of Advent that lifts our gaze from today to the end of today. We know the end of the story because we know the beginning of the story. We know the end will happen because we know the beginning has already happened. We therefore dare to have hope amidst hopelessness because God is in control. As Christians, we can live in hope and demonstrate that hope to those around us.