

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/17/2024



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

Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, November 17 th	Mark 13:1-8
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What an impressive church building!

Time marches on. We approach the end of this liturgical year where we started - in Mark chapter 13. This chapter has classic Jewish apocalyptic writing. Just like a street preacher wearing an A-board, ringing a bell, and proclaiming the end of the world is nigh can make us feel uncomfortable enough to cross the street, we sometimes skip quickly through chapter 13 and onto the passion narrative. This week's text begins with an unnamed disciple commenting on the splendor of the temple. Jesus predicts the complete destruction of the temple which must have seemed like an impossibility at the time. Yet this became a reality in less than four decades – about the same time it took to takedown Christendom in the West. What insight does Mark's apocalyptic text reveal to us about discipleship and church? How do we apply this text today in a world that has edged closer to the one experienced by Mark's original audience?

Mark 13:1-8 Commentary

The first Sunday in Advent for the current liturgical year that began last December 3rd and opened with Mark 13:24-37. This week is the final Gospel lection of this Markan lectionary year and is also from the same chapter. Many commentators suggest that Mark 13 is one of the most difficult chapters of the New Testament for the modern reader to understand. It is written in a Jewish apocalyptic style that involves Jewish history and predominantly Jewish ideas. This has led some commentators to suggest Mark has two endings. The familiar one is found in chapters 14-16 and includes the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The other is chapter 13 which addresses a period beyond Jesus' resurrection and includes the destruction of the Temple and the second coming. It is against this backdrop we find this week's lectionary text.

To begin to understand this week's text, some commentators suggest we should view it through the lens of the issues the Markan community was likely dealing with. From this perspective there are strong parallels to our own age and context which we will explore.

The text follows on from last week. After His diatribe against the hypocrisy of the scribes and observing the widow at the temple treasury, Jesus exits the temple with His disciples. The text begins with an observation from an unnamed disciple:

¹ And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” ² And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

The unnamed disciple marvels at the temple complex that Herod the Great began refurbishing in 20-19 B.C. It was not completed until 63 A.D., some three decades after Jesus' ministry. The Temple was built on the top of Mount Moriah. This was the same general location where Abraham was told by God to take Isaac and sacrifice him (Genesis 22:2) and the same general location where Christ would shortly allow Himself to be sacrificed. We know from Josephus that some of these stones were 40 feet long x 12 feet high x 18 feet wide and perhaps it was such stones the disciple is commenting on. No matter how big the stones were and no matter how impressive the complex may have been, Jesus astonishes the disciples by claiming the day will come when not one of these stones will be standing upon another. We know this prophecy became a reality in 70 A.D. as a response by the Romans to the first Jewish revolt in 66 A.D. As the temple burned, large amounts of gold and silver melted in the heat of the fire and flowed between the stones. The Romans had to dismantle the ruins stone by stone to access the precious metals.

³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”

Having relocated to the Mount of Olives across the Kidron valley, with the temple complex still in view, Jesus' inner circle along with Andrew ask Jesus for more details about the destruction He had just spoken of.

⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

Jesus responds by cautioning them to be on guard against being led astray by false messiahs and false prophets. This warning is given again a few verses later. In fact, there are two more "be on your guard" warnings in this chapter (vv. 9, 33). We know the early church had to contend with heresies on several fronts. In classic Jewish apocalyptic style Jesus begins to describe the signs of the beginning of the end of the age. Many of these prophesized events came to pass. As far as wars, there was the Roman-Parthian war of 58-63 A.D. and the Jewish revolt of 66 A.D. There was a devastating earthquake in Laodicea in 60 A.D. and the eruption of Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii in 79 A.D. A great famine occurred during the reign of Claudius.

Such events were just the beginning of the birth pains of coming end. Verse 7 is key here. These worldly disasters must take place before the end – hence the “do not be alarmed.” There would first be a great tribulation (vv. 14-23). The signs of the end and the coming of the Son of Man are events that transcend our world to involve the Cosmos (vv.24-27). Chapter 13 closes with Jesus advising vigilance (vv.28-36).

Reflection and Application

Perhaps the message here is simple: The old familiar that began with God but became distorted by humankind is going to get knocked over. Be on guard against false teachers. There is going to be trials and tribulations but don't worry. Stay the course for there is hope for the future. Perhaps the disciple in 13:1 is unnamed for a reason. Just a few decades ago anywhere in the West, a Christian disciple looking out on his or her world would have seen skylines dominated by great churches and cathedrals reaching up to touch the heavens. Christianity was

integrated throughout the main civic institutions including the schools. Mid-twentieth century saw many denominations at peak membership. Just like Herod's Temple was still being constructed at the time of Jesus, the unnamed mid-20th Century disciple could only imagine a future in which the church continued to grow and strengthen. Alas, the prophetic words of Jesus in 13:2 apply equally to this worldview of the church.

Some 60 years later we are in a similar boat to the Markan community. While the "temple" is still standing, it is only a shadow of its former glory. We now accept we are in a post-Christian society and the vestiges of Christendom are being dismantled stone by stone. If not the end of *the* age, maybe we are approaching the end of *our* age - the end of our worldview of church is nigh.

Christ, the Head of the Church, is already at work doing some extensive reorganization and renovation of our workmanship within His church. He is about to leave no stone standing of the old view of church. We too should have been on guard against heresies and false teachings. Such result when we mold doctrine to suit ourselves. and soften the Gospel to fit the culture by shaping a religion around people's needs, wants and preferences, and thus attempt to be popular. Heresies also come from focusing too much on a single point of doctrine at the expense of the rest. How much time and effort have gone into differentiating doctrinal differences between denominations (and sometimes between denominations within denominations) with each faction claiming to represent the truth. The irony is that we suddenly look around and see there is practically nobody left to care about such points of differentiation!

Our old, traditional worldview of church is being turned upside down. Sometimes old structures must be torn down before new ones can be built. If the temple is a metaphor for our traditional worldview of the church, many aspects of the church began to serve our purposes rather than magnify Christ. In this time of upheaval, we are going to experience trials and tribulations in our own right. But we should continue to have hope. We know that Christ is the Head of His Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt 16:18). We can already see smaller, and simpler church organizations emerging from the rubble. Missional communities are becoming a common means by which Christ's work is accomplished in the world - whether such communities are in church buildings or in someone's house. Being in such community with other Christians and doing life on mission together (rather than being walled off from the world in crumbling facades) is the new paradigm for church.

