

The End is Near  
Mark 13  
First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
May 9, 2010  
Pastor Dave Carver

Ahhhh, Mark chapter 13. If you have a Bible that has those subheadings at the beginnings of the paragraphs, you will notice a title like “Signs of the End of the Age”. This is, shall we say, difficult material to process.

I have a friend who loves to meditate on this passage. Her eyesight isn’t so good these days, but every time we are together, she asks me to read the Gospel account of the day that Jesus left the temple and started to talk about the things that were going to happen before “the end of the world”. And here’s the interesting thing: as I read it, she literally winces. This passage scares her to death. But she can’t stop thinking about it.

What do we do with this passage? One writer has said that Mark 13 is “a happy hunting ground for persons fascinated by the end of the world” that “figures prominently in books by doomsayers and in sermons by evangelists more interested in the next world than in this one. On the other hand, this chapter is largely ignored by pragmatists, activists, believers in progress, and all who dismiss preoccupation with the end of the world as a juvenile state of human development or an aberration of unbalanced minds.”<sup>1</sup> Um, yeah. Tell us how you really feel, professor...

What do we do with Mark 13? It’s every bit as much a part of the Biblical narrative as I Corinthians 13 or Genesis 13. How do we hear God’s word coming to us through this passage?

Let’s take a look at some clues within the text itself. Do you remember when we started studying Mark back in September, I said that one of the key features of this book was the fact that there’s mostly action, and not much talk. There aren’t very many long teaching passages here, I said. Well, chapter 13 contains the longest speech in the Gospel. So Mark, writing to believers in Rome in the middle of the first century, decided that more than these people needed to hear the Sermon on the Mount or the parable of the Good Samaritan, they needed to hear this teaching. Hmmmm. We ought to pay attention.

Verse 2 tells us that this teaching started as they were leaving the Temple, and that it took place outside the Temple, as Jesus and a few of his followers were sitting on a hill above the city center. Remember, the Temple was the place where sacrifices were offered. Last week, Jesus talked about the importance of giving sacrificially and trusting God with the future. Here, as Jesus leaves this holy building for the last time, he points to the fact that his impending sacrificial death would render the former style of worship obsolete. In Christ, we have a new understanding of sacrifice, priesthood, and forgiveness.

As the longest speech in the Gospel, it’s also Jesus’ “farewell” address to his followers. Who is there on the hillside to hear it? Peter, Andrew, James, and John. According to Mark 1, who were Jesus’ first followers? Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

---

<sup>1</sup> LaMar Williamson, *Interpretation* Commentary on Mark (John Knox, 1983) pp. 235-236.

The four who have followed him however imperfectly these last three years are getting their final instructions.

In the Gospel of John, the “farewell speech” from Jesus is the wonderful encouragement, in chapters 13 – 17, to love one another. In Matthew and Luke, there is the command to go and minister in Jesus’ name; to baptize and to teach and to serve. What’s the point of Mark 13?

Wars, and famines, and quakes...oh my! Persecution, and idolatry, and suffering...oh my! No, that’s not the point. That may be the plot of movies like 2012, but it’s not the thing that Jesus is most concerned with in Mark 13. In reality, most of those things had taken place in the lifetimes of Mark’s original readers. Remember, one of the reasons that Mark wrote the gospel in the first place is because the followers of Jesus in first century Rome were experiencing persecution and betrayal and suffering and death. They had lived through the great famine during the reign of Claudius (also mentioned in Acts 11). In 60 AD the Roman colony of Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake. In 79 AD Mt. Vesuvius erupted, destroying the city of Pompeii. In 70 AD the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the town.

No, the wars, earthquakes, and persecution are not the main thing that Jesus is trying to get at in Mark 13. Those things are the context for the central idea. I’d like to suggest that the main emphasis in Mark 13 is not the sound and light show that may or may not be going on at any given moment, but rather the promise that all of these things in history have an end. That history itself has a direction. The good news of the Gospel, here in Mark 13, is that at some point, Jesus Christ will return to earth.

And if that’s true – if Jesus is right about the fact that he is coming back – then it is in everyone’s best interest to be alert. It’s a small wonder, then, that throughout this chapter, Jesus warns his friends to be alert. Various Bibles translate these imperatives differently, but at least eight times in the chapter we see the warnings to “take heed” or “beware” or “watch” or “stay awake”.

In the last couple of weeks, I’ve had conversation with a few of people who have noticed the similarity of our current day to that about which Jesus was talking. The earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, the volcano in Iceland darkening the skies, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that is turning the sea red...people see these and they want to know – are we in the last days? Is this the end of the world?

It may be...but we don’t know. And that’s not what this chapter is about. This chapter is Mark’s bit of good news to a community that has struggled with faith in the midst of persecution. Almost everyone that Mark knows has experienced Jesus only as one who is absent – someone who was here, but who has now ascended – who has left the physical earth. What is crystal clear about this passage is the notion that this Jesus – from whom we are separated currently – is going to return, and at that time, we will be fully present to him and to each other.

Some of us, it seems, will be here on earth, alive and well, when Jesus returns. Many of us, of course, will have died. No matter – in life and in death, we are his, and we will be with him.

It's not too hard to get into a rip-roaring discussion on "the end of the world". Just throw out a few comments about wars and earthquakes and fireballs and before too long you can have people engaged and agitated. We talk about it as if it might or might not happen.

Listen, beloved, the reality is this: the world will end, and it will end, at least for me, in the next fifty years in all probability. For some of us, it will end much sooner. Others may last longer – but whether Jesus returns in bodily form during my lifetime or not, I can say with absolute certainty that I am dying, and that dying will be, for me, the end of the world.

And my sense is that whereas I can usually scare up a pretty good conversation about the destruction of the cosmos and the signs and portents that Jesus seemed to indicate here, it's hard to have a serious conversation about our own deaths – even though, as I have said, it's one thing of which we can be absolutely certain.

How are you preparing for your death? Does it scare you? Jesus, anticipating his own death and talking to the disciples about what his followers might expect, stresses the fact that there is more to our lives and our deaths than we can see. He surely doesn't minimize the fact that the path can be difficult – but he does emphasize the truth that there is more to our ending than meets the eye.

Most of us recognize the name of Lewis Carroll as the author of such wonderful children's books as *Alice in Wonderland*. But Charles Dodgson (Carroll's real name) was also trained for the ministry and served as a deacon in the church for his entire life. If you are familiar with *Alice in Wonderland*, you may know that it contains a wonderful statement of faith in which we are invited to consider our ability to live freely knowing that our deaths are only a part of the story. Listen for the words of "The Lobster Quadrille" – and I will tell you that a "quadrille" is a formal dance wherein 8 people interact – much like square dancing.

"Will you walk a little faster?"  
Said a whiting to a snail,  
"There's a porpoise close behind us,  
Treading on my tail."  
See how eagerly the lobsters  
And the turtles all advance!  
They are waiting on the shingle -  
Will you come and join the dance?  
So, will you, won't you, won't you,  
Will you, won't you join the dance?  
Will you, won't you, will you,  
Won't you, won't you join the dance?

"You can really have no notion  
How delightful it will be  
When they take us up and throw us,  
With the lobsters, out to sea!"  
But the snail replied, "Too far, too far!"  
And gave a look askance -  
Said he thanked the whiting kindly,  
But he would not join the dance.

So, would not, could not, would not,  
Could not, would not join the dance.  
Would not, could not, would not,  
Could not, could not join the dance.

"What matters it how far we go?"  
His scaly friend replied,  
"There is another shore, you know,  
Upon the other side.  
The further off from England  
The nearer is to France -  
Then turn not pale, beloved snail,  
But come and join the dance.  
Will you, won't you, will you,  
Won't you, will you join the dance?  
Will you, won't you, won't you,  
Will you, won't you join the dance?"<sup>2</sup>

The Good News of the Gospel is well-presented by Carroll – that there are two shores – one that we can see, and one that we know only through faith. And the more we insist on staying close and connected to the one, the less we'll be able to participate in the life of the other. We can face our own deaths without fear, knowing that the dance continues with structure, meaning, and purpose.

This doesn't mean that we should throw up our hands and say that this life, and our impending death, doesn't matter. Far from it. Jesus is clear in his farewell discourse that those of us who follow him are called to run the race as far as we are able, and to keep the course as best we can. We are called to keep doing what he has left for us to do as well as we can for as long as we have.

On May 19, 1780, much of New England was literally in the dark. For reasons that are still unclear, the skies in cities all across the northeast grew ominous and black. It was neither an eclipse nor a storm – but the reality was that at noon, farmers had come in from their fields and even the animals were behaving as if it were night. Panic began to set in. According to one witness, "a very general opinion prevailed that the Day of Judgment was at hand." In Connecticut, the State House looked out their windows and adjourned, hurrying home to their families. Someone brought a similar motion before the State Senate. Senator Abraham Davenport was asked his opinion, and he answered simply, "I am against an adjournment. The Day of Judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought."<sup>3</sup>

Beloved, we don't know – Jesus said that he didn't know – when our experience of this life will end. We can have faith in the one who went for us as the ultimate sacrifice for sin and who has gone ahead of us and who has promised to return for us. With the first-century Romans who heard Mark's gospel and were sustained by it...with the monks in the middle ages who were convinced that civilization was collapsing all around them...with slaves who were carried to the Americas and forced to live in inhuman conditions...with the church of every age and every time, we can live expectantly –as though life is a dance – because Jesus has proven himself trustworthy.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Alice in Wonderland*, chapter 11 <<http://www.authorama.com/book/alice-in-wonderland.html>>

<sup>3</sup> The Stamford, CT historical society <[http://www.stamfordhistory.org/dav\\_abraham1.htm](http://www.stamfordhistory.org/dav_abraham1.htm)>

We can live hopefully, and look for signs and evidences of resurrection and life in the world each day. We can live as those who find consolation, because we know that the griefs we bear will not last forever. And most importantly, we can continue to invest our lives in God's purposes, because although we cannot control earthquakes or wars or famines or floods, we can control our resolve to be his people.

I know, you're used to people looking at you in church and saying, "Stay awake!" But this time, it's not your mother who is telling you. It's not the preacher. It's Jesus. And I think he means it. The end is near. We'll get through it. But until we get there, let's stay awake, and let's stay together. Amen.