

Are Hard Times the End Times?
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Introduction to the Morning Lesson

In today's text Jesus and his disciples walk by the magnificent temple in Jerusalem and the disciples look at it with jaw-dropping awe. They should be impressed. The temple was an architectural wonder, built of huge stones, made to look eternal. Then Jesus says it's all going to get thrown down. "Not one stone will be left upon another."

A little later a few of the disciples ask him privately about when this disaster is going to take place. Jesus says, "It's not just the temple. There will be wars and earthquakes and nations fighting each other. Lots of crazies will claim to speak for me and even claim to be the Messiah. The End is coming and it's going to get really nasty."

Of all the teachings in the New Testament, perhaps the most complicated and controversial are these kinds of teachings about the end of the world. Almost every New Testament book from Matthew through Revelation seems to expect the end of the world and the second coming of Christ at almost any time. In a verse just beyond today's lesson, Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." (Mark 13.30) Christians have always had a hard time understanding that, especially after the generation to whom Jesus was speaking really did pass away.

We're going to reflect today on the first eight verses of Mark 13 but the whole of chapter 13 is what New Testament students call the "little apocalypse." It would take a couple of hours to just list the various perspectives that scholars have of this chapter. Obviously we don't have time for that. But the theme of this chapter is simple: "be alert." In verse 5 Jesus says, "Beware that no one leads you astray." (13.5) Later in the chapter he says, "But be alert; I have already told you everything." (13.23) In verse 33 he warns, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." (13.33) And chapter 13 ends when our Lord says, "And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." (13.37)

So the challenge for us in reading and understanding this text is to be alert, to watch, and to keep awake to what God is saying to us today. Let's read it in Mark 13.

Mark 13.1-8 (NRSV)

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.

Introduction

The end of the world is upon us, right?! It must be because it says so right here in the newspaper. Armageddon. The end of the world. Opening this weekend.¹ Oh, of course. It's not the real end of the world, just a movie about it. But if this movie called "2012" is as bad as the reviews suggest, it may be less a sign that the world is ending and more of a sign that Hollywood has ended making decent movies. Unless you want to see special effects showing the Sistine Chapel tumbling down to crush thousands of worshipers or Caesar's Palace tip into a fiery pit of lava ("repent, ye weekend gamblers!"), then "2012" is a movie you can pass by.²

But many people are fascinated today with the year 2012 because of the Mayan calendar. Maybe you've read about this. The Mayan civilization, which flourished in what is today southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, was known for advanced writing, mathematics, and astronomy. They developed what is called the Long Count calendar, tracking more than 5,000 years of human history, ending December 21, 2012.

Some argue that since the Mayans knew so much about so many things, the end of the Mayan calendar is a sure sign of the end of the world. All kinds of books have been and are being written about this. But a more sensible scholar (Sandra Noble, executive director of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies) thinks that using the Mayan calendar as an indicator of doomsday is "a complete fabrication and a chance for a lot of people to cash in."³

It reminds me a lot of ten years ago and all the hoopla around Y2K. There were some legitimate concerns about computer systems that used just two digits to designate a year and what would happen when the calendar clicked from 99 to 00. But along with the legitimate concerns there was a lot of disaster mongering and profiteering, including a lot of Christian groups and authors, shouting how the year 2000 was the end of the world and the return of Christ. It didn't happen then in 2000. Now we'll get all churned up about 2012.

The truth is, God's people — even the sensible ones — have almost always wondered if the End — the Second Coming, the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, the Apocalypse — was near, and if it is, how can we read that in the signs of the times. As we saw in the today's text, things Jesus said led his first followers to wonder if the End was upon them. Christians have been wondering ever since. What do we make of all this?

ONE: Most things that feel like the End are not the End

First, I want to say that most things that feel like the End are not the End. Mark's readers will have been familiar with wars and rumors of wars, with famines⁴ and with accounts of earthquakes,

¹ Ty Burr, "Armageddagain." *Boston Globe*, 13 Nov. 2009: G6-G7.

² Burr, G7.

³ G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Does Maya calendar predict 2012 apocalypse?" *USA Today*, 27 March 2007. "Journalist Lawrence Joseph forecasts widespread catastrophe in *Apocalypse 2012: A Scientific Investigation Into Civilization's End*. Spiritual healer Andrew Smith predicts a restoration of a 'true balance between Divine Feminine and Masculine' in *The Revolution of 2012: Vol. 1, The Preparation*. In 2012, Daniel Pinchbeck anticipates a 'change in the nature of consciousness,' assisted by indigenous insights and psychedelic drug use."

⁴ Cf. Acts 11.28: "One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius."

such as that which partly destroyed Pompeii in AD 62. These are the constant, troublesome realities of human history and life on this planet. There may well have been both Jews and Christians who reacted to such events in an alarmist manner, imagining that such was the End of all things. But even though tragic and painful events have happened throughout human history, such things are actually routine and not in themselves a sign of the End.⁵

But godly people have often worried about this sort of thing and wondered if the End was near. I was interested to read in the book of 2 Esdras — a writing not in most Protestant Bibles but in that group of other ancient literature known as the Apocrypha, books that are included in Catholic Bibles. 2 Esdras was written by a Jewish author about the same time that Mark's Gospel was written. The writer says, "O Lord, you have already shown me a great number of the signs that you will do in the last times, but you have not shown me when you will do them."

According to Esdras, God answered and said, "Measure carefully in your mind, and when you see that some of the predicted signs have occurred, then you will know that it is the very time when the Most High is about to visit the world that he has made. So when there shall appear in the world earthquakes, tumult of peoples, intrigues of nations, wavering of leaders, confusion of princes, then you will know that it was of these that the Most High spoke from the days that were of old, from the beginning." (2 Esdras 8.63-9.4)

Such a reading illustrates that Christians and Jews and even non-believers often wondered if the tumultuous events in human history are signs of the End. But Mark's Gospel would have us know that most things that feel like the End are not the End.

TWO: Beware the frenzy

A second teaching from Mark's Gospel is to beware the frenzy. Be wary of the frenzy about apocalyptic things whether that frenzy comes from Christian or secular sources. Beware the frenzy.

We are experiencing today a huge quest for personal spirituality. In many places all around the world, people want to grow spiritually above all else.⁶ I heard an interview on the radio a few days ago with Karen Armstrong, a prolific writer and expert on religion. She said there is religious revival — all kinds of religion — taking place around the world, except interestingly in western Europe. In Europe there is a revival of secularism.

But religious frenzy is everywhere, especially on the Internet. There are thousands and thousands of websites devoted to psychic and spiritual phenomena, including such crazy stuff as "The First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine," a church founded for those who worship Elvis. It may have been started as a hoax but some people take it seriously and worship Elvis.

We live in strange times and when there is so much religious enthusiasm it leads also to frenzied believism. People believe in everything and anything today — mind reading, witches, ESP, crystals, spells, UFOs.⁷ And all of that makes religion big business. The market for religious books and products was nearly \$6 billion in 2004⁸ and is probably much more today because for the last

⁵ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991) 309.

⁶ George Barna, *Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 5, 130.

⁷ Leonard I. Sweet, "The Great Postmodern Soul Train," *Homiletics* 9.4 (1997): 44.

⁸ Online, <http://www.marketresearch.com/product/display.asp?productid=112830>, Internet, 10 Nov. 2009.

few years it has been growing as much as 37% per year.⁹ The market for religious stuff seems to grow even in a tough economy. Religion and spirituality sell.

I could go on but there is a frenzy of spiritual things right now, often expressed in apocalyptic terms. Mark's Gospel teaches us to be wary of all of that.

Conclusion

In today's gospel, Jesus cautions his disciples against falling prey to a parade of religious and spiritual pretenders, many of whom will claim to speak in Jesus' name. Jesus warns his disciples to keep their wits about them. He is saying, "Don't go off after everyone who claims to be the Messiah. Don't believe every crazy leader. Don't think that every tragic war or every natural disaster means that it is the End." Hard times are not necessarily end times.

We clearly live in hard times. This economy has hurt all of us and some, in our congregation, in truly painful ways. And it's not over yet. Our country is fighting two wars with no apparent end in sight. H1N1 may or may not be worse than "normal" seasonal flu but it's taking a sad toll of suffering and death. We do live in hard times. And even if they are not the end times, how do we live in light of the text, in light of what Jesus says to us?

The clue is in verse 8: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Birth is a good thing. Birth is about new life and the promise of a future. The truth of the gospel is that what is happening in us and in the world are the birth pangs of God bringing a new reality upon us. The details of that reality are not clear and all attempts of making them clear have failed and will fail. But the point is that God is in control and the future, ours and the world's, is in God's hands. Therefore, we can live with hope.

A number of years ago a town found out that it was in the path of a lake that would be formed by a new hydroelectric dam when it was completed in a few years. Even though the end was several years away, before long the buildings and morale of that town were completely rundown and dilapidated. Why? As one resident said, "When there is no hope in the future, there is no work in the present."

Friends, when things are going crazy, faith in Jesus Christ leads us to see the moment as a sign of birth. New life is coming. There is hope in our future because our future is in the hands of God. Be not dismayed at frightening times nor follow after frenzied pretenders. We've got work to do in Jesus' name. He is with us now and will continue to do new things in us forever. Thanks be to God.

⁹ Online, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3107>, Internet, 10 Nov. 2009.