



First United Church of Oak Park

An Ending of a World

Mark 13: 1-8, 24-27, 32-37

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The 13th Chapter of the Gospel of Mark is sometimes called the little apocalypse, or the apocalypse of Mark. Its imagery is of the end of the world, wars, famines, the sun darkened, the moon absent from the sky: All of this was to follow the coming destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem — a monumental structure so imposing and inspiring that its destruction would be unthinkable.

An apocalyptic prophecy like this reads as if it's about the future. Except, of course, these events are all in the distant past. The temple was destroyed in the year 70, literally ancient history. This is no accident of when we were born, either. The Gospel of Mark wasn't written and disseminated until the eighth decade of the first century. So even for the very first readers of the Gospel of Mark, this prediction of the destruction of the Temple is referring to an event that had already happened. Even for the very first readers of the Gospel of Mark, this prediction of the destruction of the Temple is referring to an event that had already happened.

What is going on here? This apocalypse that speaks of the future but is in reference to the past? Written 20 centuries ago, it says the end of the world would be right around the corner, that that very generation would see it. But of course, anyone can see the world is still here. So is it just wrong? And if it's wrong, wouldn't we be better off to simply ignore these passages that speak of apocalypse?

Now, if I thought the answer to that were yes, then at 250 some odd words this would be the shortest sermon I have ever preached by a wide margin. In fact, I put to you, the apocalypse is an indispensable part of the Christian faith, shot through with hope for these days. Because in the Bible, the apocalypse is never about predicting the future. Stories of the apocalypse were never about predicting the future. The Gospel of Mark is in fact extremely explicit that predicting the apocalypse is pure folly.

All of the apocalypses in Scripture are like this, and there are several. Daniel, Revelation, the 13th Chapter of Mark. For the original audiences of those apocalypses, the events being described as the end of the world had already happened. They had already passed through times of inconceivable trial and suffering. They needed to make sense of what it meant that the world as they knew it had come to an end.

In the Bible, the apocalypse is never about predicting an end of the world in some hazy future. The apocalypse is about revealing the truth about the present while reframing that as part of a better world to come. The apocalypse is about revealing the truth about the present while reframing that as part of a better world to come.

The Book of Daniel contains an apocalypse: it reveals the truth that the people of God had their homes destroyed; they were exiles, refugees, prisoners. Daniel reframes the Babylonian exile as prelude to a longed-for return to Israel. The Book of Revelation contains an apocalypse: It reveals the truth that the people had the boot of Roman violence firmly on their necks. Revelation reframes Roman persecution of the early church as prelude to a restoration of peace and prosperity. And here in Mark, the little apocalypse of Chapter 13 reveals the truth that the people of God had suffered an irreplaceable loss in the destruction of the Temple. The gospel reframes that as standing as part of the resurrection story of the Son of God, part of the reconciliation of all things and the embrace of faith that spanned the earth.

An apocalypse in the Bible is intended for those who have already seen their world come to an end, and having already seen their world come to an end, ask of God, what now? What now? The apocalypse is never about predicting a future end of the world. The apocalypse is about revealing the truth of present suffering, while reframing that as part of a better world to come.

For the Christian faith, the apocalypse serves an indispensable function. The apocalypse is how we articulate hope in the face of even the most horrible worldly collapse. When the world as we know it has come to an end and we must look to God and ask — what now? That is the time when it is right to speak of the apocalypse.

And for us, dear friends, the world as we know it has come to end. Over 21 months of a global pandemic, the truth has been revealed.

700,000 dead, disproportionately made up of people of color, prisoners, elders living in publicly-funded, under-funded nursing homes, people working low-wage jobs. The truth has been revealed that in our country some people's lives are treated as if they matter more than others. That has always been true; the pandemic revealed the truth about the present. The apocalypse of COVID-19 revealed the truth, but that is not all an apocalypse does. An apocalypse reframes the present as part of a better world to come. Because we all saw that the world changed overnight. How we work, how we live, how we travel, how we understand safety, how the government functions, how businesses function: It all changed. The world does not have to be the way that is, with elders, people of color, and poor people being counted as less valuable. The world does not have to be the way that it is. The world can change; we watched the world change. A new world is possible.

For months, I and the rest of the world barely left our front doors. Humanity underwent a dramatic if unintentional experiment in cutting individual carbon footprints. And what did we find? It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. Global carbon emissions were still far above a sustainable level — the truth was revealed — the apocalypse of COVID-19 revealed the truth. But that is not all an apocalypse does. A new world is possible. A better world for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will have to be undergirded by fundamentally different systems.

We have lived through an apocalypse, a revealing, an uncovering, an ending of a world. The world changed overnight in ways that I could not imagine were possible. In ways that I would not believe had someone predicted them to me two years ago. Had someone described in detail to me to my face what would transpire, I would not have believed it possible.

A new world is possible. Wholesale change to the way the world works is possible. Not everyone will desire the world to be changed for the better, but everyone in the world has now had a two-year crash course in the truth of apocalypse, and that is that a new world is possible. The world as it was is no more. The world as it is today will not be this way forever. That is what an apocalypse shows. Whether it is Daniel, or Revelation, or the 13th Chapter of Mark, or a global pandemic, for Christians an apocalypse is about revealing the truth about the present while reframing that as part of a better world to come.

Do we as modern Christians need all this talk of apocalypse and the end of the world? Absolutely! How else are we to make sense of these days, and find hope in them even so? Thanks be to God for that indescribable gift.