

## Reading the Tea Leaves of Our Time

Scripture: Mark 13:1-11/Ord 33B

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### **Scripture: Mark 13:1-8**

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<sup>1</sup>3As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” <sup>2</sup>Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

<sup>3</sup>When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup>“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” <sup>5</sup>Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup>Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. <sup>7</sup>When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>“As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. <sup>10</sup>And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. <sup>11</sup>When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

### **Proclamation of the WORD**

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We used to tease my mother that everything important happened to her in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It seemed every event of significance had been in that year. One of those events was her first trip to Washington, DC. Perhaps you remember a class field trip to Washington, DC with the souvenir photo of your class taken on the Capitol steps. Each newcomer is struck by the majesty of the monuments, the mall, the Grecian Temple look of the Lincoln Memorial, the grandeur of the place. One of the highlights of our summer family vacation was being in DC over the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. It was a great time to share the nation’s capital with our children. One of the most powerful events was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade with Chinese Americans dancing, Uncle Sam on stilts, and the bus load of Walter Reed soldiers all of whom received cheers and delight. But what stands out

most in my mind when we visit the nation's capital are the magnificent buildings like the Capitol and the Library of Congress.

We can understand the disciples wonderment when they say to Jesus, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" The Temple was impressive. Remember they are here for the Passover Festival with about 100,000 pilgrims gathered for a major national and religious holiday. It must have felt like being in Washington, DC on the fourth of July. The 8 day festival was one of connecting with social ties, your clan, and with the God of the faith. Booths would be set up to help sell items for preparations for the Passover. One would need a sheep for sacrifice, spices and wines. Jewish faith has a wonderful way of marking time and practicing the faith in this way.

In the midst of one the highest points of the Jewish year, Jesus says it will all be destroyed. Not a stone of this Temple will be left and all will be thrown down. Jesus is a real downer. The disciples are sitting again with their teacher and must once again be on edge. Folks, I have to admit that this is a hard passage of Scripture today. On Sunday's like today I want to say like Jesus, "Lord, take this cup from me." This is not a message anyone wants to hear. And perhaps that is precisely why we must wrestle with it.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem to meet with his own death. The journey to Jerusalem has been a difficult one. He has predicted to his disciples that he must suffer and die and then in three days rise again so that God might be revealed to the world. The disciples have been getting more and more anxious, perhaps having their own thoughts of deserting the mission and even their friend and teacher, Jesus. Anxious days and anxious times....

Undoubtedly, we all have times in our lives where all appears to be lost. It seems as if things are coming to an end. In our culture and day, we are struggling with issues of Global relationships with other nations and the creation. We can no longer sit secure in our own homes and not be affected by things that take place on the other side of the world. The world has taken its place in our family rooms. Crises have always been, but it seems as though we are much more in tuned now to them. Institutions, that in the past have had an appearance of permanence, struggle to survive. In the same way, Jesus speaks of wars, famines, and earthquakes.

And crisis on a personal level can feel as though all is lost, as if things are coming to an end. People we love are dealing with treatments for disease and battling cancer. Children struggle to learn or get along and make friends. Relationships go South and one finds themselves alone and afraid that life has ended figuratively. We find it time to let go of a familiar habit or a substance that has been our worst best friend. We experience physical limitations or our memory fails us, and we are at a loss. Endings are painful and hard. Are you dealing with such a loss or an ending in your life?

Jesus describes what will come in the capital city -the strong, impressive and beautiful Jerusalem. Jesus message seems unreal and out of place. The disciples look around and think, "Everything looks fine to me. Oh no, Jesus, don't tell us this." Jesus knows that the Temple has lost its way. Jesus gets their attention and ours with this apocalyptic-type telling. Isn't that how it happens sometimes, life seems to be going well and then all of a sudden bad news hits? We are stunned.

II. End times are important and significant. They remind us to wake up! Get our priorities straight. Have you ever had a person living with cancer tell you that it has been a gift? It seems strange- paradoxical. Let me just say not everyone feels that way. If you are struggling with such an illness personally, you know the grief, anger and sense of loss that can come with such a disease. It is only after much struggle and emotional pain that the persons I know have come to this place. When I have asked what they mean, how can a life-threatening illness be a gift? They say things like,  
"I do not take anything for granted."  
"Every day is a gift. I want to tell people I care about that I love them."  
"I let go of worry over silly things."  
"It gives me great perspective."  
"I have grown in my relationship with God and in faith."  
"I have some important things to accomplish."

Popular songs proclaim this message. Think about Tim McGraw's "Live Like you Were Dying"

*I went skydiving*

*I went rocky mountain climbing*

*I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu*

*And I loved deeper*

*And I spoke sweeter*

*And I gave forgiveness I'd been denyin'*

*And he said some day I hope you get the chance*

*To live like you were dyin'*

*Bridge*

*Like tomorrow was the end*

*And ya got eternity to think about what to do with it*

*What should you do with it?*

*What can I do with it?*

*What would I do with it?*

Perspective- that is the gift of living in the end times. You realize that things change and time is short. That must have been what the disciples were hearing as Jesus told of the end times.

SELF- Put yourself in the place of those disciples. Imagine if you only had a month left to live? What would take priority in your life? What would you let go of? What would you give away that you have been holding onto? Would you be a better steward, a better caretaker of your loved ones, your time, your church and faith, your money and possessions?

CHURCH- What would we do as a church if we knew that time was of the essence? Would we handle our buildings and property a different way? Would we start transitional housing for families hit by the recession? Would we more passionately share the love of God and the good news of Jesus Christ?<sup>1</sup>

Facing the end of times helps us get a better handle on who God calls us to be. It also puts our lives in perspective. Jesus says in Chapter 13 verse 8 that these trials and crises are the ***beginning of birth pangs***. Did you hear that? ...the beginning of the birth pangs. Jesus does not say this is the END. He says this is the start of the beginning....something new is being born among us and within us. Birth is a time of hope, wonder and joy!

When people faced with the end of life gain perspective, they realize that something new is born in them. They have courage like never before. And strangely in the face of loss, an amazing gift of hope can be a close companion.

III. So how do people of faith deal with these biblical visions of the end? In reference to apocalyptic visions and the end of times, one theologian writes,

*When God acts in the Bible, as Jesus, announces, it is most of all to bring healing to the outcasts 'recovery of sight to the blind...to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ' to share abundant life with us and restore us to joy. This is how the Bible comes to life in our world- not as a literalistic script for end-times violence and disaster but as a river of hope and life flowing through our world, touching our lives.'*<sup>2</sup>

With movies like **2012** which premiered this weekend at the box office announcing the end times and apocalyptic destruction based on the Mayan calendar, Jesus says you do not need to know the date. That does not matter. It matters most that you trust me, that you walk with me. In the face of such end times it makes all the difference where we place our trust and our hope. For people of faith in Jesus' day, the Temple was understood to be God's living quarters. With its destruction, many would have their faith shattered. But the message here is that Jesus is the Temple of God. His is the living breathing incarnation of the Holy One. The Temple will be torn down. God's mission will be accomplished through Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit.

We are tempted to know the future and to be able to read the tea leaves of our time, to predict the future. But later in the Scripture Jesus says it is not for you to

know. We cannot know the future. That would make us God. What matters is where we place our trust and our hope.

The good news is that in the meantime, while we have breath, we live our lives in God's hands. Jesus instructs the disciples that there will be trials because of their faith. They will stand before the powers that be. The most important thing according to verse 10 is that the good news must first be proclaimed to all the nations. The message of God's salvation must first be told. And it must be told to the nations- the *ethne*, the word from which we get ethnic. You are to proclaim my message not only to those like us on the inside who already know God, you must proclaim it to those who do not know and worship God. In other words, get out of the Temple and take my message out into the places where people live.

And Jesus says do not worry when you are put on the spot. Say whatever words are given to you. It will not be you speaking but the Holy Spirit speaking through you.

Do we really trust God enough to take our message down the street where people are longing to hear some good news in anxious times? Do we really trust the Holy Spirit to empower us to do that to which we are called?

In a place of poverty and challenge, Harlem, New York sits the Abyssinian Baptist Church. This church is preaching the Good News to the nations through word and deed, and relying on the Holy Spirit. These Christians have vibrant ministries which take God's message of Good News into their community. Harlem, their location, is stricken with poverty, crack houses, and shootings. It seems like a God forsaken place. Most churches would shutter the windows and move. But, instead, they created a bank for the neighborhood poor, latchkey children's programs, neighborhood development programs, Bible Studies in the housing projects. They are living into God's future- birthing ministries and new life- following with urgency, like people living in the end times, doing the things God has set before them to do.

In an interview with someone from *The New York Times* a few years ago, someone asked Calvin Butts, the pastor, "Yeah, sure, you're doing great stuff, but it's hard to see what difference you're making; so what enables you and your folks to keep going?"

You know what Calvin Butts said? He said, "Here's what. We've read the Bible, and we know how it ends. We aren't at the end yet," he said, "but we know how it ends, and that's what makes the difference." <sup>3</sup>

Even as we work for a time when no woman, child or man can fear being beaten or abused through ministries like Safe Harbor, we hope.

Even as we go through personal crisis and heartache, we hope.

Even as anxieties of war, the economy, political unrest in our world continues, we hope.

Even through doubts of faith or waiting through a difficult time, we hope.

Even as we face death, we hope, for we know that life follows death, resurrection follows the cross, and love never ends.

Our hope is not a flimsy optimism. We trust and believe in a God who is our beginning and our end, and who is birthing something new among us even when it appears differently from the outside. We keep reading the bible, and we know how it ends. And that, my friends, makes all the difference.

May God bless the reading and hearing of God's Holy Word. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary Anderson. *Time's Up* (Mark 13:1-8). Mary W. Anderson is pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Evanston, IL. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, November 1, 2003, p. 19. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, (Boulder, Westview Press:2004), 101.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Wardlaw, *Ethics and Eschatology* on Matthew 24:36-44. A sermon preached by Theodore J. Wardlaw, President at Shelton Chapel, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, December 2, 2004.