
HOPE IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS

MARK 13:24-37

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2020
BY THE REV. DR. CAROL GREGG

Prayer: May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is the hope to which God has called us.¹ In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

We need hope. We are not the first, nor the last to need hope, but we do need hope now.

Our gospel reading for this morning comes from the Mark, the 13th chapter. This confusing, difficult chapter² is often called “The Little Apocalypse.” Here we have comments about the temple being destroyed, false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, persecution, the sun going dark and in the midst of it all, the Son of Man coming in clouds. The chapter paints a dramatic and rather disturbing picture -- it seems chaotic to me. It may reflect how Mark and his readers experienced their world.

Scholars debate when the gospel of Mark was written. General consensus seems to be around 65-75 AD. A ten-year span dating an approximately 2,000 year-old document would seem close enough, with the exception of a key event. The Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 70 AD. Was this gospel written before the destruction of the temple, thus predicting its demise, or was it written afterwards as an interpretation of the events? There are plenty of opinions on the matter, and I am not knowledgeable enough to have an opinion. What is clear, however, is that Mark wrote during a turbulent time.

A few years ago, Simon Sebag Montefiore published *Jerusalem: The Biography*. This bestseller traces the history of Jerusalem from King David to the modern period with a vividness that almost reads like a novel. The characters, battles, drama, and intrigue capture the readers’ attention, even as it is hard to keep it all straight as the story is told at a rapid clip. In his chapters on the mid-first century AD, the time period known to Mark and his contemporaries, the author paints a picture of tremendous turbulence.

Consider a few snapshots of this time period.³

After King Agrippa died in 44, Montefiore writes: “Jerusalem was run in an ambiguous partnership between Roman procurators and Herodians kings, but they could not soothe the turbulence caused by a succession of prophetic charlatans, ethnic conflicts between Greeks, Jews and Samaritans, and the widening gap between the rich, pro-Romans grandees (elite) and the poorer, religious Jews.”

When Felix was the Roman procurator of Judea from 52–60, bandits murdered opponents at festivals. “Faced with ethnic slaughter and repeated ‘pseudo-prophets.’ Felix struggled to keep the peace while enriching himself. Amid this apocalyptic turbulence, the small sect of Jesus was now split between its Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and its gentile followers in the wider Roman world.”

Next came Florus, the procurator of the area for two years in the mid-60s. “Florus flagellated and crucified his prisoners, including Jewish grandees who were Roman citizens. This was the last straw: the Temple aristocrats could no longer count on Roman protection.” Those near Florus begged him to stop, but he wanted vengeance and

¹ Adapted from Ephesians 1:17-18

² William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 444

³ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, chapter 12 “The Last of the Herods” and chapter 13 “Jewish Wars: The Death of Jerusalem”

booty. As a result, the desire for rebellion against the Romans grew to the point that the rebels overran a Roman military garrison in Judea. An initial effort to quell the rebellion failed, resulting in the death of thousands of Romans soldiers. Rome's response was dramatic, gathering 60,000 troops to subdue the rebellion. The Romans marched through Galilee, conquering the land, and sending refugees fleeing.

Not surprisingly, throughout the years, divisions among the Jews about how to live under Roman rule increased. Moderates cooperated with the occupying force; extremists saw no room for compromise. Some were motivated to be practical; others were motivated by religious conviction. Some priests tried to maintain the calm; revolutionaries challenged the priests. Others were simply rogues and bandits. Even while Roman troops were heading to Jerusalem, a bitter and bloody conflict of internal factions continued.

Before long, the Romans surrounded Jerusalem intending to punish the city for the rebellion. In 70 AD, the punishment was severe as they destroyed, slaughtered and burned their way through the city. One source estimates that one million people were killed and thousands more were taken to Rome as slaves.⁴ During the rampage, the temple was destroyed.

This was the context for Mark and his contemporaries, Much of life must have felt chaotic. An empire ruling their land, sending a variety of corrupt and incompetent leaders to Judea. Growing divisions among the people based on class and ethnicity. Competing visions on the best way to move forward. Violence spilling out into the streets. The small band of followers of Jesus lived in a turbulent, frightening environment. I expect they understood apocalyptic language. Images of the sun going dark and the stars falling from heaven probably made sense to them. In the midst of all this, the Christians needed hope.

Hope is in the words of Jesus. In this passage, Jesus declares that the Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory, and will gather his elect from the four corners of the world. (Mark 13:26-27) The Son of Man will come with power, great power that surpasses that of the turmoil of the day. God has not abandoned the people in the midst of chaos, nor is God ignoring their suffering. Instead, while the stars are falling, the Son of Man will be revealed. What is now hidden, will be seen. And when the Son of Man comes, he will gather people in from the ends of the earth. God will intervene to bring people into the divine fold.

The ingathering of the people is a theme of the Old Testament eschatological hope. All those who are scattered will finally be brought home. Implied here is the safety and security of this divine realm. The prophets point to a realm of peace and justice.

Note in Mark, what is revealed is not a final judgment of punishment and reward.⁵ This passage does not encourage the self-righteous to gloat over those they see as beyond redemption. There is no weeping and gnashing of teeth. Mark and his contemporaries did not need the threat of punishment. What they needed and heard was hope. God would not abandon them. In fact, when they could see past all of the suffering and turbulence, when the time was right, what they would see and experience was the gracious gathering of the people of God.

The time of gathering in the divine presence is coming. The chaos that we see is not the last word. God is sovereign. The divine rule will order our lives, not tempests of the day. The Son of Man is coming and we need to hang on to that hope. God is good and faithful and will not abandon us to the forces around us. Be alert. Wait and watch for what God will yet do. The day is surely coming.

There is only one little problem with this promise and this hope, and that is the temple.

⁴ Ancient History Encyclopedia, "The Great Jewish Revolt of 66 AD", <https://www.ancient.eu/article/823/the-great-jewish-revolt-of-66-ce/>

⁵ "Commentary on Mark 13:24-37" by David Jacobsen, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-mark-1324-37-4>

For the ancient Israelites, the temple in Jerusalem was to be the site at which the people would gather. The temple represented the center of the faith and was a tangible reminder of God's presence among the people. When God vowed to gather the people again it would be to their promised land, with Jerusalem and its temple at the center. Consider this from the book of Jeremiah. "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah... See, I am going to gather them from all the lands to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation; I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God. (Jer 32:26, 37-38)"

If the temple is gone, how could this promise be fulfilled? Mark opens chapter 13 with one of the disciples remarking on the temple. "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Jesus responded, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." (Mark 13:1-2) Even if the temple had not yet been destroyed, its future did not look good.

This conundrum points to the need to "Keep awake." (Mark 13:37) As the disciples tried to figure out the timing of the arrival of the Son of Man, as Mark's contemporaries wondered how long the chaos in their world would continue, as we long for an end to our current crises, what we find is not a calendar appointment in Microsoft Outlook. Instead, what we are given are admonitions about vigilance. "Be alert" "Beware" "Keep awake." (Mark 13:23, 33, 35)

Last week, Rev. Kathryn Lester-Bacon encouraged us to "pay attention" as she preached on the separation of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. The passage teaches us that whenever we care for the hungry, sick, or imprisoned, is it an act of serving Jesus himself. (Matthew 25:31-46). Rev. Lester-Bacon said "We are called to pay attention ..., to notice those who are vulnerable, hungry, shivering, shaking, imprisoned, and isolated."⁶ Giving such attention is a means of caring for the body of Christ.

A few weeks ago, Dean Powery addressed a similar theme as he preached on the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, also in Matthew 25. The parable tells of the bridegroom who is delayed, only to surprise the bridesmaids at midnight. In reflecting on this passage, Dr. Powery said, "there is a call to stay awake to the presence and appearance of Christ whenever and wherever that may happen."⁷

The Spirit is moving us once again through today's scripture to stay awake and alert. Today, our attentive waiting is for the arrival of the Son of Man. We are watching for that time when God will draw all of God's people into the Divine presence, and there find blessings, which transcend and transform the chaos of any day. We need to pay attention as we wait for this revelation, not only because we don't know when the Son of Man will come, but because we also don't know how it will happen.

We need to be alert of the appearance of God, certainly in terms of timings. No one knows when God may appear. It could be similar to the ripening of a season in which it seems obvious, or it could be like a thief in the night. We need to be alert because we don't know God's timing, and it could be any time.

We also need to be alert as to how God will come. God's track record is full of surprises -- a burning bush, a still small voice, a baby born in Bethlehem. No wise woman nor noble man predicted these events. I doubt we can predict how God will next be revealed in our lives. So, we need to keep awake.

When one of the disciples marveled at the unshakeable stones of the temple, unshakeable both physically and spiritually, I imagine the shock in hearing Jesus say it would be all torn down. And then, a little later, there is conversation about Jesus destroying the temple and in three days building another. (Mark 14:58)

⁶ Kathryn Lester-Bacon, "Caring for the Body of Christ", sermon preached at Duke University Chapel on November 22, 2020.

⁷ Luke Powery, "An Awakening", sermon preached at Duke University Chapel on November 8, 2020.

We know what the disciples couldn't yet see. The physical temple was destroyed, but the people of God were not. The new gathering site for God's people is now Jesus himself. Our meeting place, our center, is not a physical place, it is Jesus. When God breaks into our chaos and suffering, God draws us to Jesus. When we are gathered with folks from north and south and east and west into the presence of the Risen Christ, there we find the power and glory of God. In Christ, we find blessings unimaginable.

We humans have lived and do live in turbulent times. We are in a period of waiting; waiting to see what God will reveal. We long for God to break into our midst once again, revealing divine power and glory. In Jesus Christ, God has come and will come again. We do not know how or when, so we need to be alert, with open eyes and open hearts, watching and waiting to see what God will do and what God will reveal.

As we watch and wait, praying "Come, Lord Jesus", we can be sure that God will come, and it will be good. This is our sure and certain hope.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.