

How Will We Know? (Mark 13:1-8)

I don't know if you've been paying attention or not, but we just had an election.

I know it's been a hush-hush, flying-under-the-radar kind of thing. Not much said about it in the media leading up to election day.

Weird, huh?

But if you've, by chance, tuned into the culture since the election, you might be aware that a lot of people live in fear that we've tripped the switch on Armageddon. If I'm being honest, it's hard **not** to wonder if we're living in the "last days" ... at least of democracy, if not of life itself.

But that kind of fear—the fear that the world is about to end, has a long and storied history. “End times” frauds and hucksters have been around for ever.

So, what’s with all this hand-wringing over the Apocalypse?

It seems to me that it has to do with control. Apocalypticism arises whenever it seems as though things are out of control. Nascent fascism? Government corruption? The massacre of innocents in the Middle East? Russia teaming up with North Korea? Global climate change? The rise of our AI overlords?

When things get beyond our ability to exert a little control, people start worrying about the end of the world.

We can hear the voices of our age echoing in the words of Jesus this morning: “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.”

Political intrigue. Natural disaster. Conflict between countries. Widespread poverty. Ring any bells for you?

But, popular “end times” predictions notwithstanding, the author of Mark wasn’t writing to offer 21st century Americans a blueprint for hanging onto their brokerage accounts when the anti-Christ emerges. In this passage, Mark gives us a Jesus who is pastoral, thinking first of his followers and the real struggles they will face, not a conspiracy theorist interested in dispensing the keys to unlock the secrets of surviving the zombie apocalypse.

That is **not** to say, however, that Jesus’ words don’t help us to understand the dark days in which we currently find ourselves. Given the depressing situations in which we find ourselves at the moment, Jesus’ words feel hauntingly apt.

But if Jesus didn't intend to offer us the inside scoop on the rapture, if he didn't intend to give us a strategic jump on how to have the right meal prep kits in our survival bunker in the cellar when Armageddon starts, what do I mean that his words sound so contemporary and relatable?

Let me ask you another question: How is it that Jesus' words speak to us today if they weren't meant to be step-by-step instructions on how to read the tea leaves?

Again, let's recall for a moment the context in which we find our passage for today. Jesus has finally made his way to Jerusalem, where, having already read the end of the story, we know he will be executed. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, he goes straight to the temple and starts trouble with the locals in charge by turning over the money changers' tables. He accuses the religious big shots of turning his father's house into a den of robbers, doing an all-around unsavory political polka that will soon find him at the sharp end of the spear.

If you remember from last week, the religious folks got their noses out of joint and started plotting how they might trap Jesus into saying something they could use against him.

Why?

But, Mark tells us, they wanted to kill Jesus.

They started asking him a series of questions designed to catch him out so that they might reveal him for the heretical revolutionary they think he is.

Their ploy didn't work, though. He answered all their questions so that they couldn't figure out how to get the best of him in verbal fisticuffs. As a matter of fact, they stamped their feet and went away madder than a grounded nine-year-old on Halloween.

Turning to his disciples, Jesus said, “Watch out for folks like that, who think devouring widows’ houses, flexing their muscles is what leadership looks like. They’ve set up a system that benefits **them** while destroying the lives of the vulnerable.”

So, as we pick up our text for today, Jesus walks outside the temple as one of his disciples observes, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings.” To which Jesus responds, “Pretty soon, all that stuff is going to be gone. Not one stone will be left on top of another.” In other words, he predicts the destruction of the temple.

Is Jesus speaking about the temple of his own **body** or about the temple remodeled by **Herod**?

Hard to say, but we do know that in the end, both were destroyed. Jesus would be strung up by the weekend, and the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed in about 40 years (probably not long before the time of the writing of this Gospel).

Whatever the case, Jesus means to impress upon his disciples that things are much shakier than they appear on the surface.

That little tidbit of information, as you might imagine, caused no small amount of consternation among the faithful because the first time a couple of the disciples get Jesus alone, they want to know how they're going to figure out the signs that will accompany all this destruction.

Of course, what they're **really** asking for is a way to maintain a little control in the face of unspeakable uncertainty—which is ironic because Jesus has just gotten done pointing out to the scribes and Pharisees in front of the disciples that there **isn't** any way to cling to control and still be faithful.

"Give us a sign. Tell us how we can stay ahead of the game."

That makes sense to us, doesn't it?

The world is so bananas; we'll take any advantage we can get.

"Jesus, we love you and all, but we'd just as soon avoid some of the coming unpleasantness—if it's all the same to you. It's not that we don't want to do what's right, mind you, it's just that—well, we'd appreciate a little extra help. After all, isn't that what faith is about—making life more comfortable?"

And I can almost hear the sound as Jesus shakes his head and does a facepalm that measures 6.0 on the Richter scale: "What have I just spent all this time telling you? The only thing that you're going to have nailed down is **me**. The current arrangements, no matter how well constructed, no matter how entrenched, will not stand. The only thing that will last is what you give me to hold for you.

"Faith isn't about maintaining waterproof living arrangements; it's about being held afloat when the water leaks in. Following me isn't primarily about wrapping your life in bubble wrap; it's about

dying to all the ways you think you can live **without** me. Because the bad times are going to come. Don't think they won't. As a matter of fact, if you hang around me, they'll be sizing you up for your very own cross soon enough.

"Following me will almost certainly buy you troubles you might otherwise have avoided if you'd just stayed home and played **Mario Kart**. On the other hand, you **can** take heart in knowing that **I'm** in control."

I can hear my own pleas in the words of the disciples, "Jesus, just tell us what to look for so we can keep it together."

But Jesus doesn't want any part of a faith that seeks security on its **own** terms. He wants us to know that we're going to be tossed right out there in the deep end of the pool with the rest of humanity—and there'll be times when it's even more dangerous for us **because** of him.

We, who serve the crucified Jesus, shouldn't think we'll escape suffering because of our faith.

On the contrary, immediately following our text for today, Jesus tells us that we're going to encounter suffering precisely **because** we have faith: "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 ... and you will be hated by all because of my name."

What will be the sign?

The church does a grave disservice every time it sells its wares as though it were the answer to every possible question, as though what we offer is a way to put a hammerlock on life and brute-force it into submission.

Look at popular Christianity, and you'll find that what most people want out of faith is not a way to relinquish control. Many Christians don't live as though they believe God is in charge. Instead, people often look to faith for a way to organize their lives ... a way that will inoculate them against pain—Robert Kennedy, Jr. notwithstanding.

Instead of saying, “If you want to get a handle on your life, if you want happiness in six easy steps, come to Jesus,” we should be saying, “If you want to ensure that your life will be difficult and confusing ... if you want to know what loneliness feels like when you hold the hand of a trans kid afraid of being murdered for being different ... if you want to know what it looks like to offer up your body as a barrier between people of color and the White nationalism that hounds them—and then turn around only to find yourself vulnerable too ... then follow Jesus. Because if you're serious about this whole thing, you'll learn real quick what it means to pick up your cross.”

We trivialize the gospel when we convince ourselves that it's possible to be a disciple of Jesus without it ever costing us anything.

Following Jesus is hard. He asks so much. And he fails to provide us with turn-by-turn directions. He's a moving target. Can't pin him down. Can't control him.

When I went to my niece's wedding a few years ago, my brother gave the Father's blessing during the ceremony. He stood in front of my niece and her husband, and he said:

"Brittany, I remember when you were born and how we had to take care of you ... night and day. All day. Everyday. It was **work**, but work we loved doing.

"But one of the things I remember most was the first time you started to get around by yourself. I put you on the

blanket and went in the other room to do something. When I came back, you were off the blanket. And it scared me.

“And I remember crying ... because I realized that you were starting a journey toward a life of your own, a life where eventually you wouldn't need us anymore, a journey that's led you to this very moment.

“Up till then, we did everything for you. And we had the calm assurance that when we put you down someplace, you'd stay put. We knew where you were and what we had to do to get to you. But then you started moving, and I realized immediately that from that moment on, I would spend the rest of my life trying to find you, and you'd spend the rest of your life moving around, trying to find yourself.

“And I knew that I'd lost something important. I knew that your becoming who you were created to be would

inevitably come at the expense of my ability to control the world to keep you safe.

“I always thought my job was to protect you from the uncertainties of life. And the realization I’ve come to—which has caused me both great pain and great joy—is that my job wasn’t only to keep you safe but to love you in the midst of a world where I could never keep you safe **enough**. Your mom and I have waited all these years to see just who you’d become. And tonight, standing here, you’re more than we ever could have wished for.”

And that’s the thing about following Jesus. Discipleship isn’t about ordering the world so that we don’t feel any pain, so that we’re safe from all of life’s uncertainties. Discipleship is about hanging on, in **spite** of the pain, in **spite** of the uncertainties, to see the face of the one for whom we wait.

What will be the sign? How will we know?

We're going to have to keep our eyes peeled.

And while we're watching the horizon, we're going to have to keep doing the very work of justice and mercy that will inevitably infuriate the people in charge.

Is it worth it?

I can't tell you that. We'll just have to hang on and find out. But if we're doing it right, at least we'll be hanging on together.

—Amen.