

Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost November 14 2021

Mark 13:1-8

Apocalyptic literature has found a ready home in the United States. Whether in the imagery of the United States as the shining “city on a hill” that would herald a new heaven and a new earth, to the strange symbolic language of Revelation being scrutinized to find the exact time of the return of Jesus and all that would herald it. You see the latter in the formation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who based their whole belief system on predicting that return. It is also present in the writings of Hal Lindsey in the 1970’s and beyond who always seems to place the end times at some point soon, but just out of reach. The most popular example might be the *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins which purport to provide a fictionalized but faithful account of exactly how the end times will come about.

But is this what apocalyptic literature in scripture is or is supposed to be about? A roadmap to the end times?

The word apocalypse in the Greek means to uncover or reveal. It is about seeing things clearly, a literal revelation. These texts are almost always written during times of great conflict or upheaval- Daniel writes in response to the Greek King Antiochus Epiphanes, when he desecrated the temple in 167 BCE. Our reading from Mark is written in the time around the destruction of Jerusalem when the Temple mentioned in our text is indeed destroyed. Apocalyptic literature is written to make sense of the belief in a good, powerful, and just God in the midst of the experience of the world as a place ruled by evil. As revelation, it is when

God shows us what is going on from God's point of view. It uses highly symbolic language and poetry that is rooted in the history of the Scriptures to give meaning in a way that believers would understand.

While these texts can serve several purposes, ours from Mark today is answering some simple, but deeply important questions. What lasts? In the midst of turmoil, what will happen to me?

Jesus and the disciples leave the Temple after he has spent the day tweaking the noses of the authorities before a supportive crowd. The disciple looks up at the towering structure of the Temple that soared to 150 feet in the air, fifteen stories, and he asks Jesus, "We're taking on this! Really!? What hope have we against this kind of stability and power?"

Jesus' response is one that the hearers of this Gospel who had lived through/were living through the destruction of that Temple and its aftermath would have resonated with because they saw it come true, "You see these great stones, this seeming everlasting edifice? Not one stone will be left upon another. All will be tossed down."

The answer to the question, what lasts, is not this human made thing. Instead, what lasts is Jesus, God's Word to us, and his message as embodied in those early Christians assembled in the aftermath of the destruction of that Temple and the violent oppression of the Romans and asking, what will happen to us!? What lasts, is the church of Jesus Christ. What lasts is God's love and care for humanity.

In this world of turmoil and change, what lasts? Is it governments and nations? No. The Temple in Jerusalem, the mighty Roman Empire, the Spanish and British

colonial empires all lie on the scrap bin of history. And through it all, what has lasted? The church of Jesus Christ. The assembly of believers gathered around the Word of God come to us in Jesus and the visible signs of God's love for us in baptism and communion.

What lasts, is it denominations and congregations? No. Denominations have come and gone, and congregations have been planted, grown, flourished, diminished, and died. But through it all, the church of Jesus Christ has lasted. Alive in the bodies of the faithful and in the places those bodies have assembled.

We are living in our own time of upheaval, conflict, destruction, and perhaps we need our own apocalyptic literature to reveal to us the true picture of what is going on. To remind us of the scope of God and God's kingdom. To remind us that throughout history, through floods, famine, world war, occupation, persecution and more- God's people, Christ's church, lasts. We ourselves are living proof of that, because here we sit, heirs of all those who have lived and died in the midst of those struggles, assembled around Word and Sacrament, even when doing so was dangerous. A witness to God's faithfulness to God's church and to the enduring promise God has made to the world in God's Son. I will be with you and you shall have life.

One of the things these texts remind us is that life during these times is difficult, it is dangerous, it is deadly, but it is not without hope. As long as that hope lies in God come to us in Jesus Christ then in the end, nothing can truly threaten us. Not the towering edifices of human institutions, not the omnipresent pressure of society.

But, as Jesus warns, too often we turn to another savior. Especially when the church itself is persecuted, when it becomes unpopular or even dangerous to actively profess our faith, we look for a savior other than Jesus. We allow our heads to be turned by a human being, who comes before us in our time of trial and says, "I am he! I am your savior! Follow me, do what I say, and all will be well and you and your people shall be saved!" Jesus understands how tempting it is to cling to anything or anyone who promises stability at times when we feel everything is out of control. Jesus has seen this up close and personal and asks that we trust. Trust that God is with us. Trust that Christ has claimed and called us. Trust that in following him we and the church will last. That in the end, we are already living in God's kingdom.

Even understanding that, in this world of turmoil and change, it is only natural to wonder, what will happen to me?

The promise of Jesus in scripture is not that there will never be difficult times, the promise is that God is with us. That the Holy Spirit will give us words in those moments, will comfort us and guide us. That our faith and trust will be a safe harbor in the storm. That in the end nothing can touch us because God in Jesus Christ has claimed us in the waters of baptism and that is an unbreakable promise. A promise of hope and life.

In the midst of his own turmoil and upheaval, this is what Martin Luther clung to. Under penalty of death by most of the Holy Roman Empire, excommunicated by the church, Luther would have bouts of deep inner turmoil and conflict. Wondering who he was to challenge these great edifices, "What large stones, what large buildings." Wondering what would happen to him. And in the midst

of his deepest anxiety, what calmed him was to simply remember, “I am a baptized child of God.”

For Luther, the act of God in baptism was the life preserver in the storm, a safe harbor into which he could always retreat and let the waves of doubt and turmoil wash over him, an anchor holding him in place in a stormy sea. It is so for us as well.

We have been washed in these waters and arisen from them a new creation. We have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. And in that moment, we have our answer to the questions of what lasts and what will happen to me?

What lasts is God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. A love that has pursued humanity across the millennia and which claims us all as beloved of God. What will happen to me? In our lives there will be turmoil and tribulation. There will be sorrow and pain. Some more than others. But through these waters of baptism we have already entered into eternal life with God. And so, nothing on this earth can touch us. Because nothing, not depth nor height, nor things past nor things to come, not persecution or derision, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

I look out upon this assembly, both those physically present and those assembled in my mind, and I see your own time of upheaval and distress. The pandemic, turmoil in our politics, in our society, in how our assembly gathers and serves. I look out and see the turmoil in your lives, grief over loved ones dead and dying, anxiety over your own health, struggles with mental health, with money, with addiction. I have heard your questions about what lasts, about what will happen to you, to your family.

There is no diminishing the difficulty of these struggles. They are ones known throughout the history of this church. From the disciples on down to us. And what we have to cling to is just what they had.

Jesus. Jesus, God's best self expression to us. Jesus, who loves you to the cross and beyond. Jesus, who knows your grief, your pain, your struggles. Who walks with you through them. Jesus, who comes to us each week in Word read, sung, proclaimed. In this Meal of bread and wine given and broken for you. To strengthen you in faith. To experience the reality that he is with you.

The promise of God in baptism, that we are God's own. And that in and through those waters, nothing can touch us for we have already been resurrected like Jesus into eternal life.

And this means that whether it is through tears of grief or pain, through doubt and anxiety, we can sing. Sing this song with those who first sung it in slavery, a song of trust in the promise of the God who delivers. A song of trust in the Jesus who loves us.

A song sung in praise of the love of God that lasts beyond time and the knowledge that we rest in that love forever.

And so on this blustery fall morning, let us rise and join our voices with all those who have sung to God in the midst of turmoil and doubt and sing a song of trust and hope that in the end, the love of God in Jesus Christ prevails. Thanks be to God!