

### Keep Awake

Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 80:1-3

Reading from the New Testament: Mark 13:24-37

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. You have to give them credit for persistence. Wikipedia has compiled a list chronicling 205 instances when an individual or group has, with immense confidence, even surety, predicted the end of the world ... albeit without success. You may remember the saga of Harold Camping, the Berkley educated civil engineer turned evangelist who first predicted that the world would end on September 6, 1994. When that day passed with neither fire nor brimstone, Camping revised the date to September 29th ... and then ... October 2nd ... And then? The sun rose on October 3rd. (Wikipedia) Ca sera sera.

Unsuccessful, but decidedly undaunted, Camping returned to the subject of apocalyptic prognostication in 2005, predicting that the global cataclysm would surely take place on October 21st, 2011. This time, his radio network launched a big publicity campaign, and soon, every lifestyle editor from Ocracoke to the Oregon coast was sending out a reporter to interview unsuspecting pedestrians about their calendar commitments for late October. On October 21, the Dow closed up 276

points, President Obama announced the drawdown of troops in Iraq, and Demi Lovato sang the national anthem at game 5 of baseball's World Series between the Texas Ranger and ... the St. Louis Cardinals. However, that I am speaking to you today is definitive evidence that the world did not end.

Camping garnered significant notoriety for his forecast, but he was certainly not the first to express such certitude about the Apocalypse. No less than St. Martin, the Bishop of Tours predicted that the world would end no later than 400 CE; while that other famous Martin, Martin Luther, was sure the world would end before the year 1600. The master artist, Botticelli, "believed he was living during the Tribulation, and that the Millennium would begin in three and a half years from 1500. He wrote into his painting *The Mystical Nativity* that "the Devil was loose and would soon be chained."

And let us not forget Mary Bateman of Leeds, England, or for that matter, her chicken. In 1806, Mary's hen began laying eggs on which "Christ is coming" was written. (Wikipedia) Alas, it was discovered to be a hoax. It appears Mary had simply written on the eggs in a corrosive ink

so as to etch the eggs, and then reinserted the eggs back into the hen's oviduct, perhaps then producing the world's first born-again chickens.

Polls conducted in 2012 across 20 countries found over 14% of people believe the world will end in their lifetime, with percentages ranging from 6% of people in France to 22% in the US and Turkey (*Wikipedia*). Much of this is the result of mistaken interpretations of the apocalyptic literature from the Abrahamic faiths, our text included. What are unsolvable puzzles in the hands of fervent, and let's say, overconfident believers become an intoxicating quest to merge the texts, mine hidden clues, dissect calendars with a calculator, identify the players, and pinpoint the precise time when all things go kablooey.

The effort has generated any number of wild-eyed prophets of doom spearheading movements large and small, and leading followers into curious, and sometimes, tragic behaviors. Jim Jones and the People's Temple, Marshal White and Heaven's Gate, the Branch Davidians. One of the more curious contemporary circumstances connected to apocalyptic prognostication is the engagement of conservative American Christians in political support for Israel, not because of a sudden ecumenical spirit, and not for the ultimate benefit

of Israelis, but because their reading of the Bible's apocalyptic literature drives a most curious attempt to preserve the gameboard of the Middle East and manipulate the players in preparation for that last great game of Risk called Armageddon.

Not only is this not the intention of the Bible's apocalyptic literature, our apocalyptic text today is actually a rejection of such thinking.

Now, I don't know if Jesus had a spicy lunch that day, but the Jesus we find in Mark 13 is in a rather provocative mood. When a disciple remarks on the marvel of the Jerusalem temple, Jesus says, "That building? Pffft, she's comin' down. Boom!"

What? He goes on to warn them about "wars and rumors of wars," earthquakes, famines; and he tells them they will witness, if not suffer, beatings in the synagogues. Jesus, here, warns against false prophets and false messiahs, whose signs and wonders will seduce, defraud, and draw them away.

And that's before we get to our text with its falling stars, darkened sun, and the absence of inspiration for *Moon River*, or *Moonlight*

*Serenade, or Bad Moon Rising.* "Then," Jesus says, "they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."

Can't you see the disciples sitting there, jaws agape, eyes like saucers, as if some grizzled adult has just freaked them out with a ghost story. Whew! That's a lot to swallow, Jesus.

What's going on here? Well, I think the text offers a couple of word clues that when heard along with an understanding of the context of Mark's audience, provide significant meaning for just such a time as this. The words? *After* and *then*. "After that suffering..." "Then they will see..." Yes, Jesus has offered images of destruction, persecution, suffering, and violence, you know, like the images you see every day on your favorite newsfeed. And you know what? You'd see the same images on the evening news broadcasting to the homes of Mark's congregation in 1st Century Palestine.

In the year of 66 of the Common Era, during the reign Nero as emperor of Rome, what began with anti-taxation protests erupted into a

full-blown revolt of the Jews against their Roman overlords. The Roman Governor Gessius Florus responded to the nascent hostilities by plundering the Jerusalem temple, claiming the loot was for the Emperor. The Jewish rebels responded by overtaking the Roman Garrison of Judea, prompting the pro-Roman king, Herod Agrippa and several Roman officials to flee Jerusalem (*Wikipedia*). And from there the battle continued to escalate, not only between the Jewish rebels and their Roman occupiers, but also between the factions of the rebellion, particularly between the Sadducees and the Zealots. Eventually, the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple.

Remember, also, that during this time, the Christians were still a sub-culture of Judaism, retaining connections to both the Temple and the synagogue. And it was during this period of upheaval, internecine tension, and national defeat and destruction that the Gospel of Mark was written.

To understand Mark's report of Jesus' apocalyptic imagery, we have to take into account the world as Mark's audience was experiencing it. When you read just the outline of what was going on at the time, it seems like it's 2020<sup>10</sup>.

Yes, 2020 has quite a list of woes. There is Covid, Australian wildfires, murder hornets, Covid, California wildfires, explosive civil unrest, Covid, the open wound of racism, the Beirut explosion, Covid - Chapter 2 (*which is particularly innervating, because Chapter 1 never ended*), the falling dominoes of small-business failure and corporate bankruptcies, RBG's death, the revolt of the circus animals (also known as the election season), bitter partisan divides, conspiracy theories run amok, and did I mention Covid? There has been great pain, profound loss, legitimate fear, a concurrent pandemic of stupidity, thinly veiled resentments, a seller's market of despair, and enough stress and strain to fill an ocean with sweat. Ugh! At times it feels as though the stars are indeed falling from the sky, and the wild-eyed guys with *The End is Near!* signs suddenly seem less insane and maybe on the precipice of sensible.

Admittedly, what we're experiencing bears the signs of what I would call Chaos creep, particularly as infection invades your own pods of safe contact. Yet, we should remember that tense times tend to induce a form of myopia, a self-involved and near-sighted vision of history. We assume that surely no one has known the trouble we're

enduring. We project that we are the first and maybe the last to experience such chaos. And we find ourselves quoting Yeats,

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.  
 Surely some revelation is at hand;  
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand. (William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*)

We forget that these words were not written yesterday. We forget that William Butler Yeats was born in 19th-Century Ireland and wrote these words in the aftermath of the apocalyptic horror of WWI. We forget the shell-shocked emotional hulls that trench-weary soldiers became. We forget the terrorized spirits that are always the by-products of war, ravaging the lives of so many through the centuries. We forget the suffering endured during the heart of the Depression, the fear that possessed whole communities during the Polio outbreak, the bloated bellies of children during famine, the tornado or hurricane ravaged communities. We forget Rwanda, Kristallnacht, the smokestacks of Auschwitz, the Plague in Europe, the purges in the Soviet Union, the tsunami in Southeast Asia.

We are not the first generation to have those fatalistic questions tease our minds. Is this the end? Has the time of the Apocalypse arrived? Chaos has always crept close, if not to us personally, certainly to the doorstep of many peoples in many places.

That doesn't invalidate our angst, nor does it negate those occasions when we sense the stars falling from our skies, but it does marry our experience to the context of Mark's community, which allows us to hear what Jesus is actually saying. Yes, there have always been wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, pandemics, economic crises, political bedlam, familial dysfunction, and violence. There has never been a moment without someone or some people experiencing legitimate reasons to ask if the end has come, if the Apocalypse has begun.

Jesus doesn't minimize that, and certainly Jesus is never one to discount the suffering others. But Jesus does have a word for all who experience the creep of chaos. *Then* and *After*, words to assure us that the end has not come. Tomorrow will dawn. But when the end of the world as we know it does arise, Jesus will handle it, Jesus will reign, and God's kingdom will remain. And even before that, Jesus will be

present and the Spirit of God will be at work in all circumstances, particularly whenever and wherever the work that reflects Jesus' life and kingdom is being done.

We do not know the dates, times, places, and players involved with the final return of Christ and the consummation of God's kingdom. Jesus admits to his disciples that even he didn't know these things, as evidenced by the fact that he, along with many early followers, and along with the litany of history's self-proclaimed prophets, guessed wrong. Yet, as the Civil Rights icon, Ralph Abernathy, said, "I don't know the what the future may hold, but I know who holds the future."

So, in the meantime, what Jesus tells us is to keep awake. Look to those places where Jesus said he could be found, wherever compassion, healing, reconciliation, and hospitality are happening, and join in the work. Don't be burdened by apocalyptic fear. Trust that future to the God who loves you most fully. Keep awake and join in the kingdom work of Jesus here and now. The world is literally crying out for healing, the very kind of healing in which you can participate; through which you can make a difference in the name of Christ.

Perhaps a bit of helpful advice can be gleaned from the day a solar eclipse interrupted a meeting of a state legislature in colonial New England. The moon blocked the sun, shrouding New England in darkness. Well, the legislators panicked (*Is this the end?*) and several legislators rose to move for adjournment. But one of them said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, that candles be brought." (Lamar Williamson, *Mark*)

May the light of Advent's candles, guide our work and ministry now, for the end has not come; but when it does, let us trust in the peaceful and healing reign of Christ our King. Amen.