



Sunday, Mar. 29, 2020
Sermon Series: Hard Questions On the Way

Could This Be the End?
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Mark 13:1-8, 24-37 NRSV

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

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray.

⁶Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For 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 birth pangs.

²⁴"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. ²⁷Then 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.

²⁸"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Could this be the end of the world? It sure feels like it these days. There's been so much disruption and change. We're expanding our vocabulary: Coronavirus, social distancing, flattening the curve, sheltering at home. We're seeing tremendous upheaval in daily life: schools closed, restaurants closed, libraries closed, churches closed, hospitals and care facilities on lock-down. This has led to any number of complications:

adults and kids hunkered down at home, people stuck in airports and on cruise ships, workers laid-off, 401k's that have plummeted.

And let's not forget the star of the show: Covid-19. It's a virus we haven't seen before. We are especially vulnerable to it. It has the potential to spread quickly, indeed, to spread exponentially. There is no vaccine. The weak and elderly and those with compromised immune systems are particularly at risk. This past week, the United States unceremoniously took the lead for the most reported cases of Coronavirus anywhere on the planet. *Oh, could this be the end of the world?*

Anybody tired these days? Weary? Anxious? Afraid? Many of us are. Pandemics are serious business. They're not for the faint of heart. Early on, I found it helpful when Zumbro's Chris Gade shared a word from Michael Osterholm of the University of Minnesota. Osterholm is an expert in infectious diseases. He said: "We're preparing for this like it's a Minnesota blizzard but, in reality, it will be more like a Minnesota winter." That was a hard word to hear, especially as winter was winding down. I couldn't help but wonder: Do we have what it takes to face what's coming?

In our Bible reading for today, the disciples gather with Jesus in Jerusalem. They're wondering the same thing we are: Do they have what it takes to face what's coming? They stop at the temple and admire the grandeur of the building. Pretty soon Jesus puts a king-sized damper on their enthusiasm: "See these stones. They'll all be coming down." The conversation takes off from there. Michael Osterholm would have felt right at home: they'll soon be facing, not a Judean blizzard, but a Judean winter.

That winter shows up in chapter 13 of Mark. This chapter is as close to real-time as anything in the gospel. Though Mark is writing some forty years after the events take place, he weaves in the cares and concerns of present-day followers of Jesus. Truth be told, they've been experiencing even more change and disruption than us. The Jewish-Roman war has been dragging on for at least 4 years, and there's no end in sight. Then, their capital city, Jerusalem, gets flattened by the armies of General Titus. Then, their beloved temple, the place where they meet their God Yahweh, gets demolished. Self-respecting Jew everywhere are worried sick: *Could it get any worse? Could this be the end of the world?*

Believe it or not, for the early Christians to whom Mark writes his gospel, it probably has gotten worse. They've come to believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. They've been living with one foot in Judaism and the other in their newfound faith. And they've often paid a high price for it: Family fights. Nasty comments from neighbors. Disparaging remarks at work. And now the devastating news coming out of Jerusalem. Anxious and frightened followers of Jesus have to be questioning: *Is this faith business even worth it? Could this be the end of the world?*

In chapter 13 Mark does a masterful job of applying the earlier words of Jesus to the current situation. He likely has a source or two to help piece things together. To get a better feel for the story, I encourage you to read the entire chapter. Jesus tells his

followers: "When you hear of wars and rumors of war, don't be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. In fact, this is just the beginning of the birth pangs."

This image is meant to be hopeful. By characterizing the disasters to come as birth pangs, Jesus affirms God's control over history, and of the essential hopefulness of the future. He's acknowledging that giving birth is hard. The closer one gets to delivery, the worse the pain. History is like that, Jesus says, the closer to the end, the worse the suffering. But keep in mind: as with birth pangs, there's a purpose to the suffering, it's headed somewhere. The goal is a new beginning.

Jesus will have more to say about this, but for now he continues to talk of troubles. There's a cost to their discipleship. In the verses between our passages, Jesus spells it out further: "You will stand trial before councils and give testimony before governors and kings. There's a personal cost too. Families will be split up over ties to Jesus, husbands will turn against wives, children against parents. You will be hated by all because of my name. But know this: the one who endures to the end will be saved." Some forty years after the fact, Jesus is still speaking to his followers: "Endure! Keep the faith! With my help, you have what it takes to face just about anything!"

I read an article by a former Jehovah's Witness named Sarah Courteau. She was talking about preparing for Covid-19. As soon as Courteau heard whispers of the virus, she automatically started getting ready. This was long before toilet paper and disinfectant wipes were in short supply.

What surprised Courteau is how quickly her childhood came rushing back—her fears of Armageddon and of the need to prepare. Her mind went to the book of Revelation and the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse. There's a rider in Revelation who sits atop a pale horse and sows death thorough plagues and other calamities.

Jehovah's Witnesses cite the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 as evidence that the rider of the pale horse is still active in our world today. And so, even though Courteau has long since given up her Jehovah's Witnesses roots, a little voice inside her keeps asking, *How can you be so sure? Could this be the end?*

A few years back, there was a poll done by Pew Research. It showed that 41% of American believe that Jesus will return before 2050. That's 30 years from now, or less! That's a lot of Americans! Some are confident that Jesus will watch out for them, and they will be okay. But many are convinced that it's up to them to gather up supplies for a time of tribulation. That includes guns and ammo too.

Courteau had an end-times checklist drilled into her head at an early age. And now, because of Covid-19, she can't let it go. *You need to be ready! Look for the signs! The end could come at any moment!*

The fact of the matter is, Jesus doesn't always make it easy for us to understand these things. He says: "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branches become

tender and put forth leaves, you know that summer is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Jesus, what are you trying to tell us? I remember reading somewhere that there have been believers in every generation since the time of Christ who've been convinced that these words apply directly to them. *They* will be the last generation. The end is right around the corner.

Some, like Albert Schweitzer, think Jesus was flat-out wrong in his thinking about the end. Maybe. But maybe not. Much of Mark 13 points not to Jesus' coming in the clouds of heaven, but to what's going to happen to Jesus himself in the very near future. Like his followers, he will soon stand trial before councils, and give testimony before governors and kings. This may feel like the end of the world, but this suffering has a purpose. It will soon be clear. Jesus will be crowned king on a cross. He will be proclaimed Son of God as he dies. And according to Mark, this generation of first-century believers has already witnessed it. Jesus' words have already come true.

Before the chapter is over, Jesus gives the disciples one more instruction: “Stay awake. The end is not yet. No one knows for sure when it will be, not even the Son, but only the Father.” As part of keeping awake, like the disciples in Gethsemane, Jesus points to the times when they can look for him. Those times aren't far away: evening – when he will share a meal with his disciples; midnight – in the garden when he will pray, and then be arrested; cockcrow – when Peter will deny him; at dawn – as he stands before the Jewish Sanhedrin and finally before Governor Pilate.

As we get ready to turn the page to the next chapter in Mark, Jesus has assured his disciples that he will be coming someday in power and glory, but not yet. For now, he has prepared his disciples for what will come soon. It's going to feel like the end of the world to them, but Jesus words are trustworthy and true: “Endure! Keep the faith! With my help, you have what it takes to face just about anything! Moreover, there are larger forces at work and a larger plan in place. There's a purpose to this suffering. It's headed somewhere. The goal is a new beginning.”

Whether we're talking about the suffering of Christ on the cross, or of early Christians forty years later, or of Coronavirus today, one's perspective is so very important. See if this is helpful for you? C.S. Lewis wrote an essay 72 years ago on living in perilous times. He wrote: “People ask me: ‘How are we to live in an atomic age?’ I'm tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plagues visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land...any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer...or air raids...or motorcar accidents.

“In other words, let's not begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. [We're not the first ones to experience perilous times, and we won't be the last.] The first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb, when it comes, find us doing sensible and human things: praying,

working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children....not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies, but they need not dominate our minds.”

Are we living in the end? Along with Christians down through the ages, we might be tempted to think so, particularly when catastrophic events occur. The news about Covid-19, and its devastating effects, can certainly feel like the end. The disruption is real and painful. Day after day we’re reminded that we are not in control. Like those early Christians to whom Mark was writing, we’re looking for a lifeline, the assurance and hope that larger forces are at work and a larger plan is in place.

Jesus tells us: “This is just the beginning of the birth pangs. The end is not yet.” When Jesus comes in power and glory, we’ll know. We need faith in the meantime. In faith, we pray for help to endure the trials that come. In faith, we do our best to stay awake. In faith, we trust that God has not forgotten us. Indeed, Christ promises to walk with us whenever our world gets turned upside down. Christ promises that our suffering is headed somewhere—towards a new beginning. And you can bank on it: Christ’s words are trustworthy and true! Amen.