

The Beginning of the Birth Pangs

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Texts: Mark 13:1-8, Hebrews 10:11-25

“Tell us: when will these things be, and what is the sign when all these things are going to be accomplished?”

With some mixture of fascination and fear, many Christians over the centuries have repeated the disciples’ question. We want to know what the future might hold, and how we can recognize the signs of what is to come. And we have a dim, anxious notion that the answers are hidden away somewhere in the Bible, if only we knew the right code to unlock the prophecies. That is why there is a huge market for the TV evangelists and authors of popular books that claim to know the hidden truth about the future and to reveal it--to anyone willing to send in a contribution, or to plunk down 15 dollars for the latest exposé of how current events are foretold in Scripture. Publishers of books such as *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and the wildly popular *Left Behind* novels have turned the art of apocalyptic speculation into marketing machines that have sold literally millions of books. And now, the latest bubble of excitement is being inflated by the release of a new movie called *2012* that opened in theaters this week. The premise, apparently, is that the ancient Mayan calendar predicted that the world as we know it would end on December 21, 2012. Last night, I googled 2012 and immediately found a website with a clock ticking down from 1132 days, 11 hours, 57 minutes and 9 seconds. The header on the website reads: “911 started it, then Katrina, Iowa floods, California fires, increased natural disasters, the countdown has begun.” The trouble is, of course, that history keeps proving all the speculations wrong.

But Mark’s Gospel offers us the real inside story on this matter. And I am now going to reveal it to you, here in Duke Chapel this morning... free of charge. (Though I’m sure Dean Wells won’t mind if you gratefully drop an extra check in the collection plate.) I have come here today to reveal to you the truth of what Jesus *really* taught about the Day of the Lord and the End of the Age. (As is so often the case, the lectionary gives us only a small snippet of Jesus’ speech

in Mark 13, and so we missed out on hearing the secret in our Gospel lesson this morning. But even though it's not in the lectionary reading, I am going to divulge it to you.) So, here it is, Mark 13:32: "About that day or hour *no one knows* // neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

And with that said, I suppose I could just end the sermon and sit down. // But I won't: the end is not yet. Why? Because it is important to look more closely at what Jesus actually *does* say to the disciples in this chapter of Mark's Gospel. If this isn't a teaching about when the world will end, what *is* it about? And how does he answer their question: "*Tell us: when will these things be, and what is the sign when all these things are going to be accomplished?*"

In order to get clear about these matters, we need to see where the question fits into the story. The four disciples who pose the question (Peter, James, John, and Andrew) are the four fishermen who were the first disciples that Jesus called back at the beginning of the story in Mark 1. They have followed Jesus around on his whirlwind mission that began in Galilee, a mission of healing, driving out evil spirits, feeding hungry multitudes, challenging the wealthy to give away their possessions, and confounding the leading theology professors of his day. They have witnessed, at last, his entry to the holy city of Jerusalem as the crowd chanted this acclamation: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (11:9-10). And so these disciples are primed to believe that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to bring the longed-for restoration of Israel, the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

But then, stunningly, they have seen Jesus barge into the Temple precincts, overturn the tables, and accuse the authorities of turning God's house into a "den of robbers." Now these fishermen are not scholars, but they have heard the story of the prophet Jeremiah, and so they realize immediately that it was Jeremiah who first accused the Jerusalem priesthood of making the Temple a "den of robbers" (Jer 7:11), and they know that this accusation was part of Jeremiah's prophecy that God would *destroy* the Temple--not because some cosmic clock had ticked down, but because the Temple had become a place where people were going through the

motions of religion and trusting in deceptive words while they continued to oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, to shed innocent blood, and to worship idols. And so it begins to dawn on the disciples that this Jesus they have followed might stand in the tradition of Jeremiah, as a gloomy, weeping prophet announcing the doom of the Temple. And as Mark tells the story, he highlights the point visually, like a skillful cinema director, by framing Jesus' table-turning action with the disturbing account of Jesus' cursing a fig tree that failed to produce fruit. The withered fig tree foreshadows the fate of the Temple. This is very upsetting to any devout Israelite.

And so, as Jesus leaves the Temple again at the beginning of Mark 13, it is not surprising that one of the disciples tries to coax out of him some reassuring expression of admiration for the glorious temple: "Teacher, look! Such stones and such buildings!" To be sure, the Jerusalem Temple was an amazing edifice, constructed as part of a massive building program by Herod the Great. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote of it, "The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye" (*War* 5.222). Its retaining walls were eighty feet high--higher than the nave of Duke Chapel--and it was built of massive stones, some reportedly more than 40 feet in length. The exterior walls were covered with gleaming white marble and gold. So the disciple from small-town Galilee gawks at this structure and sees in it a symbol of power and prestige and permanence. He might have recalled the very words from Genesis sung by the choir this morning as the introit: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17). If cameras had been invented, no doubt he would have been snapping photos.

But Jesus is not interested in snapping photos. "Do you see these great buildings?" he snaps. "Surely not one stone will be left on stone here." That's a conversation stopper! // But later in private the four inner-circle disciples press their urgent question: "*Tell us then: when will these things be, and what is the sign when all these things are going to be accomplished?*" And so everything Jesus says in Mark 13 is a reply to the disciples' puzzled question about the destruction of the Temple. That means that Jesus is not talking about the end of the world or the

end of the space-time universe. As New Testament scholar Ben Witherington nicely puts it, Jesus' prophecy is "primarily not about the end of the world, but about the end of a world--the world of first-century Judaism as a temple-centered faith."¹ And now, by the time Mark writes his Gospel, roughly 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the terrible prophecy has come true, or is about to. In the year 70, the Roman army asserted the Empire's power by crushing a Jewish rebellion and reducing this glorious Herodian temple to rubble. The cover of your bulletin this morning shows an artist's visualization of that attack just beginning.

That is the historical setting of this passage. To a first-century Jew, the destruction of the Temple would have seemed like the end of a world, for the Temple was the place where sacrifices of atonement were made for Israel's sins, the place of God's dwelling, the place where heaven and earth were conjoined. Its destruction must have seemed like the end of all things, the end of all hope. It must have seemed as though God had abandoned his people. It is nearly impossible for us to imagine the impact of this disaster. But in our time, we *have* experienced *one* horrific event that enables us to imagine through a glass darkly how the Temple destruction might have felt: the destruction wrought on 9/11. The decision announced on Friday to bring the accused planners of that attack to trial in New York has awakened our memories of that day. Recall those apocalyptic images of destruction raining from the skies, falling towers, streets filled with fire and smoke, desperate people fleeing the carnage, complete bewilderment, the collapse of all sense of order, the pervasive fear of what might happen next. Recall all that // and then multiply it by some enormous factor, for in the first-century cataclysm, it was not skyscrapers and the Pentagon being destroyed, but the house of God on earth. That's what Jesus has prophesied. And so the four disciples want to know when this calamity is going to happen.

But Jesus does not seem interested in spelling out a timetable for the destruction that he has prophesied. Instead he starts warning his followers not to be led astray by false prophets and fake messiahs, or slick books and films. There will always be charlatans around (there were

¹B. W. Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 340.

plenty of them around in Jesus' time claiming to be Israel's Messiah)--and you'd best be on your guard, he says, not to be taken in by them. And so he warns the disciples not to be alarmed when they hear about wars and earthquakes and famines, for these things will happen again and again in one place or another, whether in Palestine or Afghanistan, or in Pompeii or China, or in the Sudan. "Don't be alarmed," he tells them. Terrible things will indeed occur, "but not yet the end." So far, we might think Jesus is simply shrugging and saying, "Hey, stuff happens." But that is not the case, for as the discourse unfolds we realize that Jesus is saying something else. He's not saying there will never be an end, that this is just the way life is, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. No, he is saying that these terrible events, brutal wars and famines, even the utter demolition of Israel's holy Temple, do indeed signify something: they are "the beginning of the birth pangs." Or, to use the term more familiar in our ordinary speech, "the beginning of the labor pains."

My colleague Joel Marcus, in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, points out that most English translations, like the one you heard in the Gospel reading today, translate the sentence as "This is *but* the beginning of the birth pangs." That suggests that our present sufferings are just the early stages of a process that may go on for a very long time. But there is no basis in the Greek text for that little word "but." What the text actually says is simply, "This is the beginning of the birth pangs."² They have started; it's going down now, and there's no going back.

But what does this mean? The image is a common one in ancient Jewish texts, often used to describe the sudden sharp affliction brought upon humanity by God's judgment on the Day of the Lord. But in apocalyptic passages like the one we're reading today, there is another level of meaning, another metaphorical twist: God is expecting! God is about to bring a new world to birth. There's a foreshadowing of this in Isaiah 42, where Israel's God, speaking through the prophet, says:

²Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (Anchor Yale Bible 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 878.

For a long time I have held my peace,
I have kept still and restrained myself;
Now I will cry out like a woman in labor;
I will gasp and pant. (Isa 42:14)

Birth can be a violent, dangerous, painful process. (Some of you here today know that far better than others of us, who have been the beneficiaries of your pain, without really knowing what it is like!) In the ancient world there were no hospitals, no sophisticated anaesthetics, few technological means to ease the pain and danger of labor. The labor pains come suddenly, causing intense convulsions, writhing in agony. Likewise, Jesus says, the world is convulsed with conflicts, wars, earthquakes. But the expectation is that these terrible pains will not last long, and that through them the new creation will be brought into the world. Paul says something very similar in Romans 8:

I count the sufferings of the present time trivial compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed for us. For the eager longing of the whole creation yearns for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God. . . . For we know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up to the present time. And not only the creation, but also we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit—we too groan within ourselves as we await adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:18-19, 22-23.)

And so the image of labor pains points not only to suffering but also to *hope* and *new life*. When Jesus speaks of birth pangs, he is looking over the edge of the horizon of human pain to a new world coming. As he says in another place, “When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish, because of the joy of having brought a child into the world.” (John 16:21).

When does Jesus speak that parable? It’s on the eve of his own terrible suffering. Here in Mark’s Gospel, too,] Jesus stands on the verge of undergoing excruciating pain. Just as the Jerusalem Temple, the place of God’s presence, will surely be destroyed by the Romans, so also

the temple of his body is to be destroyed by the Romans in the crucifixion. But through Jesus' labor on the cross, the new world is brought to birth. Here lies the great mystery of the Gospel.

And so Mark 13 is not a gloomy script or timetable for events at the end of the world. Rather, our Gospel passage does two things at once. First, it *reassures* us. In the world we see now,

...Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed...³

But Jesus says, don't be alarmed. The agony of history is not beyond God's knowledge and power to redeem and transform. These terrible things are the beginning of the labor pains, but God will somehow bring new life out of them. And Jesus' own suffering and resurrection will be the means through which God's new world will be born.

In the meantime, our role--as Mark tells us again and again--is to *watch*. And that is the second thing our Gospel text does. It calls us to watch. Not *watch* as in "be a passive spectator," but *watch* as in "be a sentry: be on the lookout, stay awake." Don't be lulled to sleep by the deceptions of phony religion; / don't be intimidated by kings and empires, or overawed by institutions that claim religious grandeur; keep bearing witness to the truth; / above all, don't give up hope and stop looking for God to come and make things right. Precisely because the world is suffering labor pains, that means the hoped-for birth cannot be far away.

So, not in fear, but in hope, watch!

³William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," cited from M. Mack, L. Dean, and W. Frost (eds.), *Modern Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 75.