

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Wrecked by God

Sunday, November 14, 2021

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If the text for today made you a bit uncomfortable, you're not alone. It makes most of us feel uncomfortable. Whenever Jesus goes apocalyptic and talks about the chaos and terror that is to come, we prefer to move quickly to one of his more comforting lessons.

Early in the week Tiffany asked me what my text was going to be so she might incorporate it into her teaching for the children. When I told her, she said, "Yeah, I think I will hold off on that one for now!" Wise choice. So, parents, not to worry. If your child is in children's church they will not be asking about the end of the world at lunch today! If they are still here in the sanctuary, you have my permission to play tic tac toe to distract them.

I am not sure what the lectionary committee was thinking when they chose this text from Mark as the gospel lesson for today. Don't they know the holidays are coming up and we don't want to be bothered by all this doom and gloom? We are just starting to feel good coming out of this pandemic. Surely, there are other texts that are more uplifting. This one sounds like Jesus was having a bad day.

In fact, I wouldn't blame you for being a bit put off with me for choosing this text. "Charley, really? Couldn't you have chosen another text. Out of all the texts in the Bible, you chose this one? We would've preferred you dusted off an old sermon and preached it rather than deal with this mess."

That's fair because it is a mess. This text is all about eschatology, the study of end times. And there is nothing more terrifying, more polarizing, more upsetting, and more controversial than passages in the Bible like this one.

I have preached on many different topics over the years – science, evolution, creation, sexuality, the death penalty, death, etc. But the one topic that has created the most anger, the most mean letters, the most hostility, is by far sermons on eschatology, the end of the world.

In a previous church I served, we had a prominent family leave the church over a sermon I did on this topic. They had been in the church for years. Very supportive. Very generous. Nothing but encouragement from them. Until, I preached a sermon on the book of Revelation. "That's it, preacher. We don't agree with your interpretation of the end times. I think we will go be Presbyterians." "Can we talk about?" "No! We are out of here."

Some people aren't kidding around with their view of eschatology. In fact, many proclaim their theological position on their cars. One bumper sticker says: "Christ is coming again, and boy! Is He mad!" Then there is that other bumper sticker: "In case of the rapture, this car will be driverless." To understand that you must understand "rapture" theology, which teaches that when Christ comes again he will gather up the saints - the real Christians - to meet Him in the sky...regardless of whether or not they have acrophobia! I read of a Lutheran pastor who saw the perfect rebuttal on another bumper sticker: "IN CASE OF RAPTURE I CLAIM YOUR CAR!"

It is funny, but people will be quick to tell you that eschatology is no laughing matter. They get all riled up about it. In my ministry I have learned that many folks have a strong emotional attachment to their interpretation of eschatology. In fact, some people go Coo Coo for Cocoa Puffs over this stuff.

I know of a colleague who once watched a TV preacher talk for an hour about his new book that supposedly explained everything we needed to know about the coming of Jesus and the end of time. "You must have this book," he said over and over again, a telephone number (not even toll-free) constantly flashing at the bottom of the screen. Seems that he was the only one who had prophetic insight into world events, and for a mere \$14.95 we could have the benefit of his wisdom. We would not survive the coming terrors unless we had this book.

My colleague called the number and suggested to the poor operator that if this preacher really thought this was so vital to the survival of the planet, and that the end was so near, he would be giving the book away! I mean, he won't need the money, right? It's all coming to an end anyway. Who needs a bank account? The woman on the other end of the line was not amused. "Sorry, sir," she said, "but I don't know much about theology" to which my colleague replied, "Neither does the writer of the book you're selling."

Over the years people have capitalized, sensationalized, and terrorized people using Bible passages like this one today. There has been wide spread exploitation of apocalyptic bible passages.

But we as intelligent, sophisticated, educated mainline Christians have sought to do our righteous duty by being rational about these disturbing biblical passages. "Calm down. Calm down. Let's take a closer look at what Jesus was actually saying..." But the truth, if we are honest, is that we can't explain away today's passage. No matter how much interpretive maneuvering we do, it remains a troubling and unsettling text.

The disciples said, "Look Rabbi! This Temple is magnificent. Look at these stones! Isn't it grande?"

Jesus replies, "Well, you better enjoy it now because there is going to come a day when it is obliterated." "Uh?! What? What is he talking about?"

"Yep, this precious Temple will be destroyed and then wars, rumors of wars, nation against nation, earthquakes and famines."

This begins Jesus's longest sermon in Mark. He is speaking to the 12 disciples, his inner circle and letting them in on a big secret – "Mark my words, fellas, that strong, majestic, immovable temple that you think will last forever will be destroyed."

You can imagine what a punch in the gut that was for the disciples. If you interpret the text in our vernacular, it punches us in the gut too.

"You see your beautiful church with that beautiful steeple.... Well, one day it will be reduced to rubble."

"I know you think America is a wonderful country. That it will stand strong forever. Well, think again. There will come a day when it will be overcome and wiped out."

You see, contrary to what you might think, our text isn't Jesus predicting the future. He wasn't giving us clues so we could make an exact timeline of his second coming. He was warning us that permanence is a myth. The world and all that we love and cling to is not as stable as it appears. It is temporary. It will not last. You can try to preserve it all you want, but God is going somewhere with this world, so don't get too attached. As a theologian roughly put it, "God is going to get what God wants, no matter how much God's got to mess up what you've got in order to get it."

Ouch. Well, Charley, that may be true, but how is that helpful? Surely, you have a more inspirational, uplifting message than that? We are just trying to get through the week. Is there a comforting word you can give us so we can get to next Sunday? How can this be good news for us today? Well, it all depends on how you look at it.

One of my preacher friends remembers a student mission trip to Honduras. Twenty of them went to work in a makeshift health clinic in the poor village of San Marco. Every night they built a fire and sang hymns. One night one of the students suggested that they go around the circle and have everyone share their favorite Bible verse. Someone said John 3:16. Another said, "The Lord is my shepherd." And then a Honduran woman said through an interpreter that her favorite verse from Mark 13, not one stone left on stone, earthquakes, famine and fire. She said, "That passage has always been such a comfort to me."

My friend thought, "Comfort? Comfort? What is she thinking? Apocalyptic obliteration a comfort?" Then a nurse sitting next to him said, "I spoke to that woman earlier. Did you know she has given birth five times and three of her children have died of malnutrition?"

Yeah, the inevitable destruction of our beloved status quo may be bad news to some of us, but to others it is the best news they I have ever heard.

I have a friend who knew a veteran cop. For years this cop was bombarded with violence, death, abused and neglected children, corruption and hate. My friend asked him one day, "How have you been able to do this job for so long? I would be a basket case." He replied, "I would be too. But over the years there is one thought that has kept me going. One day this is all going away."

And Jesus said, "But the end is still to come."

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” -Revelation 21:4

You see, the way you feel about today’s text and message really depends on how you feel about life right now. To put it another way, if you are not a fan of today’s text and sermon, just give it some time, it may soon become one of your favorite passages too!

That rejection letter comes. The wife asks for a divorce. A loved one dies. The doctor says you have six months. The world comes crashing in on you and you don’t think you can make it. You think all is lost and your pain is eternal.

But then, by God’s grace, you might remember today’s text. Jesus said all this suffering is not the end. It will not last forever. In fact, he said they are but birth pangs. That what we often see as death is, in God’s eyes, a birth. Doesn’t always mean that God has caused that suffering, but he can certainly birth something out of it. A new beginning occurs. Healing happens. A better job comes along. Death leads to life everlasting.

God is Alpha and Omega. What does that mean really? I have learned as a pastor then when God shows up in your life, there is both an end and a beginning. You can’t have one without the other with God. And in our more honest moments, we know this to be true. Jesus said it, “If you want to save your life, you must lose it.”

Will Willimon remembers speaking with one of his students at Duke Divinity School. He asked her, “How do you get to seminary?”

She replied, “Well, God called me and made me leave a good paying job. My husband said this wasn’t what he signed up for and he left me. And my teenaged son said he would never forgive me for making him move from his friends.”

Willimon remembers how humbled he was and how unworthy he felt to teach someone who paid such a high price to obey God’s call.

A theologian once said, “In every move toward God, and in God’s every move toward you, something is gained, but something also is lost, and that loss may be painful.” But that pain just may be the birth of something new. Something so wonderful that you never could have imagined it. Only God can make a painful end a glorious new beginning

But, you know that, right? God took a bloody cross and transformed it into a sign of new life.

Several years ago, Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks did a comedy skit called the "2013 Year Old Man". In the skit, Reiner interviews Brooks, who is the old gentleman. At one point, Reiner asks the old man, "Did you always believe in the Lord?"

Brooks replied: "No. We had a guy in our village named Phil, and for a time we worshiped him."

Reiner: You worshiped a guy named Phil? Why?

Brooks: Because he was big, and mean, and he could break you in two with his bare hands!

Reiner: Did you have prayers?

Brooks: Yes, would you like to hear one? O Phil, please don't be mean, and hurt us, or break us in two with your bare hands.

Reiner: So when did you start worshiping the Lord?

Brooks: Well, one day a big thunderstorm came up, and a lightning bolt hit Phil. We gathered around and saw that he was dead. Then we said to one another, "There's somthin' bigger than Phil!"

Well, there is something bigger. Someone bigger. Bigger than the hate, suffering, evil in this world. We call that someone Alpha and Omega.

Lord, you have been betrayed... This is not the end. There’s something bigger.

They have flogged you... This is not the end. There’s something bigger.

Lord, they have driven nails into you... This is not the end. There’s something bigger.

But Lord, they have pierced your side!... This is not the end. There’s something bigger.

Lord, you are about to breathe your last breath.... This is not the end. There’s something bigger.

Lord, they locked you up in a tomb...This is not the end. There's something bigger.

Lord...you're alive! How?...I told you God was bigger.

God is bigger, wiser, stronger and greater than all that we cling to in life and all things in life that cling to us. Sometimes we go kicking and screaming into that truth and other times we welcome it like the dawn after a long dark night.

But kicking and screaming or waiting and embracing, our text reminds us that God will have the last word. Is that good news or bad news? Well, it all depends on how you look at it.



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