

Sunday April 3, 2022
Lesson 5: Right on Time
Scripture: Mark 13: 5-8; 28-37

Context:

In today's lesson, we continue in the book of Mark and learn of the call to wait and be alert for God at work in our lives. We make a mark as the disciples of Jesus when we wait and trust in God. Today we reflect on how we can wait and also be aware of being led astray by those who come in the name of the Lord.

Even though we find ourselves in the season of Lent, we often read this passage in the season of Advent, a time we prepare ourselves for the birth of our Lord. Yet if we pay attention close enough, we see how Jesus' words here speak to themes of Lent as well as the current seasons of life we find ourselves. The words are timeless, meant to inspire and help guide us today.

Chapter thirteen in Mark is known as the story of the "Little Apocalypse," as it displays several characteristics of apocalyptic thought.¹ Apocalypse comes from the Greek term meaning "to uncover," and for the Christian tradition, apocalypticism deals with the understanding of the end of things, or God's future plans. In some ways, the speech Jesus gives here is much like that of a final discourse to his disciples. Jesus is giving his disciples various things to watch for and a reminder for them to stay focused on the church's sense of mission and a futuristic dimension to the fellowship of love to guide them.² The text gives several clues to both the context of the time as well as clues on how to understand it for today.

As we now know from study and research, the gospel of Mark was perhaps the earliest gospel written coming between forty to sixty years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. During this time there was great upheaval as there was persecution within the Christian tradition, the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple, and looming wars within the Roman Empire as various groups rose to seize power.³ Jesus, and the writer of Mark, are not seeking to inspire doom and gloom. Instead, as these things occurs, they want to give hope about the Son of Man coming in glory. Jesus makes clear no human will know those dates and times, and it would be better for the people not to panic and be anxious.

Instead, like the fig tree, the people are to see these things taking place and to take hope in the words given to them by Jesus. Using allusions such as the master going off on a journey, Jesus invites those listening (and reading if they are Mark's audience), to stay alert and focused on what is in front of them. Whether one interprets this passage literally, pragmatically, or existentially, the vision of the future for Christians is one seeking to strengthen discipleship in the present.⁴ Jesus hopes to embolden those who follow him to focus on serving him and loving

¹ Williamson Jr., Lamar. "Mark." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 236.

² Ibid., 238.

³ Ibid., 239

⁴ Ibid., 242.

him instead of seeking deceivers who tell us what we want to hear or making plans which are less than fruitful.

Application

As strange as it may sound, Jesus' words in today's passage are meant to give us hope. They are not meant to cause us anxiety or panic. The purpose of them is not to batten down the hatches and pray for the Lord to just come zap us up. Instead, the passage offers for us practical application for how to be watchful, waiting for the Lord to reveal things, and continuing to do what God has called us to do.

Jesus offers us some very practical tips to watching and waiting. He first talks about deceivers. In my most recent confirmation class session, my confirmands and I discuss the three General Rules from Wesley given to guide Christians in how they live. Hopefully you know them. "Do no harm. Do Good. Stay in love in God." We discussed how we harm others. My confirmands felt lying was where a lot of harm could begin. When pressed, they discussed how people who lie to you often begin by promising you things or telling parts of truth. Pretty soon as you go on, you discover they were not truthful at all.

Their experience echoes my own. Often deceptive people will tell you what you want to hear or partial truths. They might even promise you certain things if you follow them; things which cannot be given or guaranteed. Unfortunately, in this season of the United Methodist Church, I see lots of deception. People use their family name or attempt to promise things which are not their things to give. Jesus makes clear we are to listen to him. If people try to entice you to divide, to break off, you can pay attention to the rest of Jesus' warning. There will always be those who want wars, divisions, and chaos. Because somewhere during it all, it benefits them and rarely does it benefit all parties.

Jesus offers us the chance to say no to them. And in the meantime, even as wars rage and things unfold, we are to cling to the words of Jesus. Jesus invites us to seek his lessons and leadership, inviting us to be on guard about our walk with him. He wants us to focus on the good we are called to do. He wants us to see even as wars break out and as deceivers come to lure us down rabbit holes, he has things he wants us to do and work towards despite the chaos around us.

Even more so, Jesus invites us to think about how we want Jesus to see us at work. Do we want to be seen doing nothing because we were "waiting on the Rapture" to come and save us? Or do we want to be the deceivers, going around doing things other than day to day ministry like taking care of the sick, the poor, and the burdened? Jesus makes it clear he has given us things to do with our time, our energy, and our resources.

In every place I've served, I've heard people fearful of what is to come when the discussion around End Times happens in other congregations around us. I completely understand; there is so much we do not know or foresee. Yet what I find is helpful is to pay attention to what God is nudging those in my congregation and me to do. Are there hungry people in the community? Then let us use our resources to help those in need. Do we have teenagers asking questions about God and wondering if they want to join the church? Then let us have the confirmation classes and youth groups so they have a place to learn about scripture and God's call on their lives. Are there people in our congregations who want to learn more about the Word and the truths there they can apply to their lives as witnesses? All the better to have those studies so we can grow in our discipleship.

Jesus says be alert. He wants us to pay attention to what is in front of us. He does not invite us to begin wars, to create division, or to worry about the future and the contingencies of if

this or that happen. He wants us to focus being on disciples, telling deceivers to go their merry way, and to see the dreams and nudges on our hearts as followers of him.

How can you resist deceivers who attempt to focus your minds on anything than other day-to-day ministry? What is God calling you to do in your community in this season? Who are the people God is calling you to be in ministry beside? How can you stay alert and think about where God is nudging you to be in ministry? What practices center and root you in Christ?

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