

The Sky Is Not Falling...But Watch Yourselves – Judy Cox

Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Our sons didn't want us to volunteer as Bible Quizzing sponsors; they enjoyed their weekends away on quiz trips and, to tell the truth, so did we, at home! This particular trip came up short on chaperones and drivers, so, when their coach asked, I agreed to go. Little did I know that the team "always" went out to eat after the closing ceremonies; we didn't start the 6-hour trip home 'til after 8 p.m., and I was tapped as driver! Not such a good idea—never noted for my driving skills, I'm also the one who falls asleep watching "Elementary" around, oh, 9:17! My apprehensive request for someone who'd talk to me got me the chattiest quizzer riding shotgun. She kept me awake for the first 3 or 4 hours. Around midnight, though, even she began to falter conversationally. The van & I both began to drift off, until the sound of our tires on the rumble strip jarred us all awake! The adrenaline rush roused me for a while—but in 45 minutes I was again so drowsy that—you guessed it—I **deliberately** veered onto the rumble strip... with a repeat performance around 1:30... That story has gone down in the annals of family lore. Never again was I asked to drive for a youth group event.

In the book of Mark, this chapter 13 functions like a rumble strip. To the disciples, marveling at the great stones constituting the wonder that was Herod's Temple, Jesus responds that *not one stone would be left ... upon another*. In the two previous chapters, both Temple and the Temple system have received not only criticism but condemnation. In chapter 11's Triumphal Entry, which the lectionary had us reading back on Palm Sunday, the priests refused their psalm-indicated role of blessing Jesus from the House of the Lord; when he rode to the Temple, instead they ignored him. Jesus' response, his cursing of the leafy but fruitless fig tree, is heightened by Mark's sandwiching it around his cleansing of the Temple. This escalates further in chapter 12, as Elise unpacked for us last week, with the corrupt Temple system robbing the widow whom Torah commands it protect. These chief priests, scribes and elders, the Temple establishment, oppose Jesus actively and repeatedly, both religiously and politically. Jesus critiques them publicly, and also repeatedly, just as ruthlessly as he treated the Temple proper; Mark records him telling the parable of the vineyard *against them*. These confrontations culminate in this 13th chapter of Mark, with Jesus' word on the Temple's destruction.

Along with parallel passages from the other Synoptic gospels, this chapter falls into the genre called apocalyptic. Most often associated with the last half of Daniel, and the book of Revelation, this genre generally speaks to eschatological crisis and judgment approaching, with a heavenly being revealing those secrets to human recipients, in order to enlighten and encourage perseverance. Desperate earthly circumstances are literally "en-visions" and recast, inviting the readers to see their situation from a supernatural perspective, with this other reality transcending theirs. For example, in our brief Old Testament reading a heavenly being described as *one like a human being*—probably the angel Gabriel—reveals to the human Daniel that together with Michael, Israel's patron-angel, he is engaged in a heavenly battle against other angelic "princes." Assuming an Ancient Near Eastern mythology odd to us, this passage underscores the apocalyptic conviction that earthly events closely connect with events of the supernatural. A desperate time of anguish lies ahead, but only as prelude to Israel's deliverance, and (at least partial) resurrection. (Scholars note this as the clearest Old Testament reference to resurrection and eternal life.)

But let's return to our Gospel passage. Sometimes called the "little Apocalypse," this 13th chapter of Mark begins with Jesus (the heavenly being) revealing to the (human) disciples this special insight on the Temple's destruction, and the heavenly perspective on earthly conflicts to come. Jesus knew, and Mark and his first audience knew, that the Temple system wasn't the only trouble ahead! *Beware*—watch out!, Jesus says, *that no one misleads you, leads you astray, waywardly. Many will come in my*

name, and will lead many astray. Wars and rumors of wars? Judea's four-year revolt against Rome? Yep—don't be startled. It happens... and will happen, *but the end, God's end, is not yet, is still to come.* Rome destroying the Temple? International, inter-kingdom conflict? Earthquakes and famines? Yes, yes and yes. Don't be alarmed.

Notice that Jesus doesn't answer the questions posed by the two sets of brothers in verse 4. *When will this be, they ask? What will be the sign?* What's the heads up, the inside information you can give us so we're good? (Much later, in verse 32, he outright refuses to address those when questions, saying, *About that day or hour no one knows ... but only the Father.*) Here, he redirects their when questions to a "How"—this, then, is how you are to take your stance. Don't be complacent! Watch out! Like the message of the rumble strip, wake up!

Wars, and earthquakes, and famines happen—don't be alarmed or startled by them. Don't go all Chicken Little with "the sky is falling!" about them. But be afraid, be very afraid, at your own vulnerability to being misled. Watch out for that! Wake up about that! If you will, it's that certainty that you're golden, that you have the inside scoop, that will most endanger you. You, too, disciples, can be mistaken!

Back in chapter 12, Jesus corrected the wrongheaded Sadducees with these very words. They wanted to argue about and against the concept of resurrection, taking to its logical extreme the custom of levirate marriage (that is, marriage of a brother to his deceased brother's widow, in order to carry on that brother's name). *You are greatly mistaken,* Jesus rebukes them (*quite wrong*, as the NRSV translates); *you know neither the Scriptures, nor the power of God!* That term *mistaken*, or *misled*, willfully wrongheaded, he uses again in this warning to the disciples. So we should pay attention to the rest of what he said to the Sadducees! They refused to acknowledge the prophets as Scripture. As Jesus' rejoinder shows, they also didn't attend fully to the Torah, the Scriptures they did accept. More than that, they did not know the power of God! How might the disciples, and Mark's first audience, have needed to hear those words? How might we?

God's power is at work! In the words of my favorite Christmas carol, "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep!" God has a *telos*, an end, a purpose, an intention; God is up to something! Just as the Sadducees, stuck in the Torah, would not acknowledge God's voice speaking to and through the prophets, so Israel as a whole remained stuck in the Temple system, and would not acknowledge God's fulfilled purpose in the person of Jesus. Mark's audience was very possibly being pressured to join the Jewish revolt against Rome, which, from the earthly perspective of the Jewish resistance, would surely bring God's end, God's purpose of Jewish restoration. If those early Christians didn't join the Jewish resistance, they'd be considered traitors!

And indeed, many do come in those intervening years, claiming to be the Messiah. How easily the faith of the early believers might have wavered, wondering about Jesus' identity. Why had it been so long? Some do come, claiming to be Jesus finally returned. We can imagine their doubt—and then the disillusionment. Are these charlatans all there is?

But don't be fooled, says this passage. Don't be co-opted into the wrong, earthly war! Hang on. You, church, know the power of God, manifest in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. You know Jesus! You know that the restoration of Israel to the glory days of the Temple is not God's goal, but rather the glorious culmination of all things gathered up and set right in Jesus, the resurrected Son of Man.

Our epistle text deals with the same Jesus vs. Temple tensions as the gospel, but from a theological perspective. The book of Hebrews, working with the compelling logic of the sacrificial system for its

Jewish recipients, shows Jesus replacing all that system, and rendering it obsolete; he in his own body fills the roles of sacrifice, sacrificer (i.e., high priest), and sacred space (the very physical components of the Temple structure). We Gentile Christ-followers, centuries removed, may not find that logic so compelling. But in this still in-between time, right alongside those early Christians, we all need to hear, *He who has promised is faithful*. We need that exhortation to persist in faith, hope and love, to *draw near* together in corporate worship and then *provoke one another* to live out that faith, hope and love in *good deeds*. *The Day*, God's Day, is not yet here but is approaching!

God does have a purpose, an end, a Day of deliverance and resurrection, but that Day, that end is not yet. Jesus says, to his disciples then and now: *This is but the beginning of the birth pangs*.

My poor obstetrician should have mounted this verse on his office wall! Very great with child (our first), I called him one Sunday afternoon, panicked about "this sudden pain up here." With a perspective far greater than mine, he patiently responded to me, "Judy, you're going to have a baby."

There's a reason why we call childbirth "labor and delivery"! Every birth moves from time of anguish to "deliverance." We cling, along with the disciples and with Mark's church, to this truth. God's intention IS coming to fruition. Remember the power of God! At the end of this labor and delivery will be a great new birth. Yes, each of us, in Christ, can now know a new birth. But all of us, together with all of creation that groans with us, will also know that new birth for the world. It goes through labor pains that herald the birth of God's new day of justice and peace, mercy and truth. Already, but not yet, that Age to Come is arriving.

Watch out, Jesus says, but not in a way that is anxious and fearful. Be aware of your own vulnerability. Don't decide to shut your eyes, misled by impatience and cynicism into renouncing faith. Don't nod off, misled by despair and exhaustion into renouncing hope. Maybe, especially for us today, don't be co-opted, misled, by defensiveness and fear, into renouncing love.