

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today we finish our year-long study of Mark's gospel. It is the last time we'll hear from Mark until November 29, 2026. This final reading wasn't the chronological ending of Mark's story— that was the empty tomb we studied on Easter. Nor did the lectionary bring us back to the beginning with a quote from Isaiah and John the Baptist – remember, there was no birth narrative in Mark. Rather, we are left in the middle of the gospel in what is often called the “little apocalypse.”

They call it the little apocalypse because it has such a strong similarity to other books of the Bible that are apocalyptic— for example, Daniel and Revelation. Now, apocalyptic literature is a distinctive genre found in the Bible and other ancient writings. It often intrigues people with its symbolism and imagery, its focus on judgment and vindication, its cryptic use of numbers and dualistic viewpoints, and its fixation on eschatology or the end times.

And we heard some of these characteristics in Mark today. First, Jesus walked out of the temple in a continuation of last week's reading. Remember, Jesus had just called out the abusive practices of the scribes and how they took advantage of the widows and those on the margins. And without missing a beat, the disciples praise this great temple where the abuse takes place in today's reading. These disciples are so characteristically Marken in that they just don't understand Jesus. So, Jesus

names it once again saying, this institution, these abusive practices, and this structure that houses these horrors will be torn down.

Yet again, these disciples don't get it, so they privately ask Jesus a question to try and understand why he'd want to tear down such a magnificent and colossal structure, a building that was the pride and joy of the Jewish people, and a place that was understood to literally be God's home.

The first thing Jesus said was: "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." And this translation from the original Greek is missing a key point. You see, the original Greek says "many will come in my name and say, 'I AM.'" And that difference, the "I AM" is really important! Here's why: remember back in the Hebrew Scriptures there was a guy named Moses, and God's names was revealed to Moses as "I AM." So, then here in Mark, Jesus is saying that many people will come and try to say they are the savior, that they are God. That they can save the people from their afflictions. That God wants this, or God says that. But, Jesus said don't be fooled. Remember what God says. Remember God's vision for the world.

What we've learned studying Mark's gospel this last year is that Jesus' whole purpose was to proclaim God's emerging vision. And, God's rescue operation for the world is to reject violence and pride. That living into God's vision means engaging in acts of service and love. Jesus said, do not be fooled! For, anyone who says anything else – anyone who promotes violence, anyone who builds up their own interests at the expense of others, anyone who does not serve their neighbor, and anyone who does not put

love forward as the primary currency, they are a fake, a phony, and a false prophet. Do not be fooled. Do not be led astray.

And Jesus goes on to say that wars, rumors of wars, division, earthquakes, and famines are not actually the end of the world. So, don't get tricked into believing that everything is ending. Don't look for a savior who is a con. Don't freak out and grasp at straws. Instead, be reminded that this is the beginning of tearing down the structures of inequality and the agents of oppression that undermine God's purposes. This is the beginning of birthing something new.

And this is probably what trips people up most about apocalyptic literature. Oftentimes people think that Revelation or Daniel or this "little apocalypse" are meant to be predictive in nature or a source of revealing when and how everything will end. And, apocalyptic literature is designed to name that the world is screwed up. However, the importance of apocalyptic literature is to provide hope and reassurance by emphasizing God's rule in the face of hardship.

And, this little apocalypse in Mark's gospel does just that. It is a reminder that there are structures of oppression all around us that look so mighty, so strong, so impressive, and so awe-inspiring. They have been constructed for generations, and sometimes they lose their way and no longer serve their intent. And when these harmful systems and frameworks begin to crumble, when the stones begin to fall, when the familiarity starts to shatter, what the Scriptures remind us is that those in power will try everything they can to convince us that what is before us is beautiful.

You see, when the towers of white supremacy begin to crumble because of God's vision, there will be rumors of war. When our individualist culture is exposed for being against God's vision, culture wars will begin. When God's vision for equality rightfully results in women leading and asking for pay equality and respect for their gifts, people will divide against people. When the edifice of gender begins to crumble, when the tower of heteronormativity begins to fall, when the love of violence begins to buckle, and when our environmental mistreatment begins to topple, Jesus reminds us that this is just the beginning of the birth pangs. This is just the beginning of God doing something new.

This, friends, is the gift of and hope found in the apocalypse. For, we know that this world is not perfect. Yet, Mark's gospel reminds us to stay true to God's vision of love, justice, and peace no matter how the powers of this world try to reinforce the towers of inequity and injustice. As God's people, we strive not to let the external beauty, the comfort of existing structures, or the calls of false prophets' teaching lead us astray. For we are rooted in the sure and certain hope that God's vision will be realized, and all will know love, justice, and peace.

That hopefulness is God's gift. For, in a world that idolizes fame, fortune, fear, and violence, Mark's gospel reminds us that God's way is one of service, peace, and love. And today's gospel assures us that, even in times where everything seems to point to the end of the world, God's vision will be fulfilled. God will always love and be present with us. God will always advocate for the poor and speaks truth to abuse.

And as we end our study of Mark, don't forget that this gospel never shares a story of Jesus birth, and it ends with Jesus missing from the tomb. This is Mark's reminder and invitation. A reminder that the whole gospel is the birth narrative of God's vision, and that in the resurrection we are invited to be active in God's unfolding story. So, as we put Mark's gospel back on the shelf, may we see God's birth among us in new ways, and may we take seriously our baptismal call to reflect God's love and bathe in God's apocalyptic hope this Advent season and always. Amen.