

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 15, 2015
Pentecost 25
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Daniel 12:1-13
Psalm 16:5-11
Hebrews 10:32-39
Mark 13:14-23

In our Old Testament and Gospel lessons this morning, both Daniel and the disciples find themselves full of questions. Primarily, what they seek to know is the *future*, and what signs or events might alert them to the fact that the end of the world is at hand.

Much of the book of Daniel is *apocalyptic* in form, and comes from the word “apocalypse,” which means “unveiling” or “revelation.” You will remember that these types of writings such as we find in Daniel and in the book of Revelation arose in situations of great persecution. Persons and faith communities found their very lives at stake, and the apocalyptic view of things was that the only solution to the stress and persecution was a dramatic and radical intervention by God.

Apocalyptic writings often contain bizarre images and symbols, which tempt those who read them to see in these images a sort of “blueprint” for the future, a roadmap for how and when the world as we know it will end.

As is always the case, however, select passages or books of the Bible must always be read with special attention to their *contexts*. This is especially true with respect to our Old Testament and Gospel lessons this morning.

Time does not permit me to explore both of these texts in depth. Instead, I hope to give us an important contextual framework for these passages, and then share what I hope is some very Good News behind them.

Let's begin with Mark 13.

Prior to our text for today, the disciples and Jesus are leaving the temple, where one of the disciples makes a comment about its beauty and grandeur. Jesus responds by saying, "this magnificent temple is going to come crashing down, stone by stone."

A bit later, his disciples ask him what the signs will be that the destruction of the temple is at hand. Our lesson today is part of Jesus' response to them. Jesus is showing his disciples that God is about to bring judgment on Israel's corrupt religious leaders by bringing down the temple where much of their hypocrisy is centered. God is about to bring an end to the world of religious life as they know it, and God's designs and plans will from this point be centered on Jesus and his followers, not the temple.

Quoting from Daniel, Jesus says that a sacrilegious object that causes desecration will stand where it ought not to be in the temple. Daniel refers to it as

the “sacrilegious object that causes desecration” which will be erected for worship once the daily sacrifice is removed.

The language here is a bit messy, but the gender of the word “standing” is masculine, causing most scholars to conclude that whatever this desecration may be, it is most likely a *person* and not a thing. That is, Jesus is referring to someone who will cause the temple to be desecrated, and therefore abandoned by God.

In any case, Jesus seems to say that when this sacrilege takes place in the temple, the time to flee is imminent. The customary Jewish and ancient Near Eastern wisdom was that safety was to be found within the city walls (and especially the temple), but here Jesus says the opposite is true. So much so that if one is working on the roof or in the field, he or she is not even to go back to the house for a coat. They are to flee, because the destruction will be horrific.

Interestingly, the temple sacrilege Jesus foretells happened in the year 68 AD. The historian Josephus tells us that religious zealots took over the temple, allowing criminals free reign even into the Holy of Holies, and even allowing murders to occur in the holy space. A phony High Priest named Phanni was overseeing this barbaric activity.

One other piece of historical context is important here. We also know that during AD 64-68, the Emperor Nero was engaging in widespread and brutal persecution of Christians. This discourse from Jesus would be important for them,

because it would answer questions they had about whether the disturbing things happening to them were signs that the end of the world was at hand. Jesus' answer to that question is "no." The judgment on the temple and the religious leaders is not to be confused with the day of final judgment. What is happening to them is the end of *a* world, not the end of *the* world.

The point of all this contextual digging is that the events spoken about here in Mark 13 were mostly fulfilled when the Romans swept into Jerusalem in AD 70 and destroyed pretty much everything, including the temple. There are a few verses in this chapter that refer more to the end of the world, but what we've read today saw its fulfillment in the first century.

An additional point to all of this is that Jesus' words are not meant to encourage "forecasting" about the end of the world. His words are meant to encourage watchfulness and discipline, especially in the face of great hardship. The reason that disciples (then and now) must always be prepared for the end is because they cannot read from the course of human affairs any signs that it is near (cf. v. 33).

Interestingly, this is the very thing that Daniel is told in response to his question of the angelic messenger, where he asks: "How will all of this finally end?"

He is told: “Go your way until the end. You will rest [i.e., die], and then at the end of the days you will rise again to receive the inheritance set aside for you.”

In other words, Daniel is told, “Go about your business. Live your life. Take one day at a time, and be faithful to God. The end will finally come, and when it does, you will rise again, and receive your reward.”

In true apocalyptic fashion, the message given to him by the angel is a reminder that he will be victorious, *even if he loses his life while he is in the game and on the field of battle.*

Finally, I want to look at a feature in Daniel that became very good news for me this week.

Daniel 12 follows what is essentially a retelling of history in chapters 10-11. There, we encounter a birds-eye view of one empire following another, with egotistic leaders abusing their power and acting as they please. Faithful followers of God not only suffer, but are sometimes killed. History seems to be running its course with little or no intervention at all from God.

Does this sound familiar at all? Does this ring true? Does this not look like today’s front page news?

But here in Daniel 12, a noteworthy feature is inserted into this retelling of history. In chapters 10-11, and now here in chapter 12, we are introduced to angels who serve to stand up and fight on behalf of Israel. The reference here is to

Michael, the Archangel. In chapter 10 he is called the “Prince,” and described as a superhuman, celestial being tasked with the responsibility of protecting God’s people.

Daniel and his people are reminded that when they do not have the power and ability to contend against the brute force of evil rulers, the greatest of all princes fights on their behalf. The situation may seem utterly hopeless, but what Daniel’s oppressed people can see and hear does not tell the whole story. Behind the scenes, forces more powerful than those on earth are shaping the destinies of peoples and nations.

And if this is true for Daniel, is it not also true for us? Through the eyes of faith today, we also can affirm that behind the scenes of current world affairs, forces more powerful than those on earth are shaping the destinies of peoples and nations.

Through the eyes of faith today, we can affirm that regardless of the hardships we may face in life, we are not alone. God’s grace and strength are standing over us, fighting for us, strengthening us in ways that we cannot see with the naked eye.

Through faith, we may even be able to affirm the presence of angels and archangels who surround and accompany us on our journey, God’s agents of grace

and power who help and assist us in this cosmic battle where every piece of ground is contested.

And in the end, we affirm by faith the promise to Daniel and the disciples of Jesus in Mark's Gospel: the promise of being raised up to eternal life on the last day when the world *really* does come to an end.

Armed with that promise, let us come to the Lord's Table with faith. Let us resolve to live our lives in preparation and readiness. Let us treasure the grace we receive here. Let us live with the strength it gives us, even to the very end.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.