

Mark 13:1–13

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Taught for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) ·
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In these gray latter days of November, when the days are getting shorter and shorter and it is becoming more and more overcast, as the end of the church year approaches, our texts turn to the apocalyptic. I suppose it goes with the mood of the season. It's at this time of year that the church serves up visions of the end times for us in the lectionary.

This is a difficult topic for the church. Hermann Gunkel, a great old German scholar, wrote a book on creation and chaos at the beginning and at the end, in which he analyzed the Genesis stories and the apocalyptic stories together. You get the whole overview there, from start to finish, from creation and fall all the way to the end times, to the last day. It is extraordinarily helpful to think in those terms, because there are some parallels. The beginning is the fall, and in some senses these apocalyptic texts sum up the results of the fall and indicate what is going to happen to the creation as a result of the powers set loose in sin, death, and the devil.

The church, of course, has trouble with this for obvious reasons. According to the book of Revelation, in the end the church will have finished its mission and won't be anymore. Forde used to love that. There are no church councils in heaven: no synod assemblies, no churchwide assemblies, none of that monkey business. It's all done. And the church likes to think of itself as eternal, so it kind of pushes these apocalyptic texts away.

But really what we are hearing here is the end of the story, let out ahead of time. Because it is the end of the story, it tells us where we are finally going, what to expect, and what is coming our way. So I think it's tragic that these texts are neglected. It's tragic also because when we lose the apocalyptic, when we lose this movement toward the future, we lose the lean. There's no movement; everything tends to turn static and fixed. When the apocalyptic is working, everything turns italic. It starts to lean toward the future; everything is out and going, and it's a lot of fun. That is especially true in Lutheran theology. If you lose the lean in Lutheran theology, it freezes up, and lots of the fun of it is gone.

So here we go. We have four texts. Hebrews, of course, is still caught up in the whole concept of sacrifice, using the tradition of sacrifice to express the difference between what sacrifice seeks to accomplish and what Jesus actually did. That's a lot of fun. Then we have the psalm that can go right beside it, Psalm 16, short and succinct and beautiful; it comes right to you. So we'll take those two together. And then we'll take the two apocalyptic texts together, Daniel 12 and Mark 13, because they are wonderfully comparable and overlapping and really show us how apocalyptic works. Both are formally apocalyptic literature, and we can get a good example of how it works. I'm not telling you this so that you can preach it; I don't suppose you should go to the pulpit and describe apocalyptic literature. But if you catch how it moves, it informs your preaching and shapes it and gives it a particular bite and flavor.

Hebrews 10: Once for All

So first of all, Hebrews 10 and Psalm 16. Hebrews 10 is a full-scale attack on the sacrificial system, and it starts out by pointing to the usual problem with sacrifice: it must necessarily happen over and over again. It is repeated endlessly. The church always moves on sacrifice with the assumption that the priest, the church, is active, and that God is passive and needs or wants something from us in order to back off.

Now you can recognize that as a demand of the law. You can recognize it as the law intervening and saying, "You had better do this. And I want sincerity, and I want it complete, and I want it from the heart." And of course, when that kind of thing sets up, the law becomes insatiable. You sacrifice again and again and again, bloody again and again, and keep right on sacrificing and never get anywhere. So the whole cult of sacrifice, set up in the conviction that we are actually doing something, turns out to be pious blarney, about as effective as a New Year's resolution, and maybe not as lasting. And so Hebrews, written by someone who was closely familiar with this system and once had a big investment in it, turns vicious here. It is exposing the sacrifice.

In contrast to this, Christ made his sacrifice once for all, *ephapax*. It's done. It's completed. It has accomplished everything. It is completely effective, and because it is completely effective, it doesn't need anything extra. It is not a sacrifice of appeasement in which God has finally been persuaded to back off. What kind of doctrine of the Trinity would that be? Rather, it is God's sacrifice for us. And because God has done this sacrifice in Christ Jesus, because God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, it is effective. It's done, it's complete, it's all

over, it needs nothing else. All that's left is for us to say, "That's mine. I'll take it. I like it. Hand it over."

And when you say that, Christ Jesus of course says, "You bet," because what he wants is your faith. And to the extent that he doesn't wait for you to say, "I'll take it," he gives it to you, until finally you wake up to the fact that it is there and it's yours, and his sacrifice has become effective for you. So once for all he sacrificed himself, and all that remains is for us to receive it and say, "This is really fun. I like this. I'm going to keep it, and I hope he will hold me forever."

You recognize, of course, that this is a particular problem for people who have lived in sacrificial systems. That includes Judaism, which was oriented around a cult of sacrifice. Nearly every native religion in the world is sacrificial. And we too are forever fighting rearguard battles with liturgical saints who want to turn the services of the church into a sacrifice, as in the eucharistic prayer, for example. Every time we get a new hymnal, the language of sacrifice comes creeping in like poison ivy, or poison oak, which is endemic out here, and strangles everything.

Well, Christ Jesus didn't make a sacrifice to anyone. He made a sacrifice for you, and as the author of Hebrews points out, that's the end of sacrifice. The only point where sacrifice is now required is in relation to your neighbor, who needs you and can benefit from your service. "Do you think I need your bulls? Do you think I'm hungry?" God says. "What are you offering me that stuff for? I'm done with that; forget it." And he turns you to your neighbor and says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *logikē latreia*, your reasonable service." Isn't that fun? There you go: sacrifice has ended. So this is a very helpful little lesson from the book of Hebrews, and he is going to keep pounding away at it as long as we're working in Hebrews.

Psalm 16: You Will Not Abandon Me to the Grave

Now Psalm 16 is a little less aggressive. This is a friendly psalm that has its arm around you and speaks gently. "Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you." It begins with a call. "I have said to the Lord, 'You are my Lord, my good above all other.' All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land, upon those who are noble among the people." It is full of confidence and joy. It is a kind of prayer and a giving of thanks for the answer at the same time. It's like that punctuation mark they were trying to market a couple of years ago, the interrobang, a

question mark with an exclamation point. That's what is happening here. He is calling out to God for help, but at the same time expressing great confidence that God hears.

So this song, as usual, comes out of the sure and certain hope of the gospel. It rejoices even as it cries, and so it issues in deep assurance. "My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also shall rest in hope. For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit." There you go. You can smell a little apocalyptic smoke in here: this colorful language of death and the grave. "You will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit." That is the very nature of God, who loves to raise the dead and is never happier than when he delivers from evil. There's joy in heaven, he says, when this happens, and that joy is spilling over from heaven in this very song, so that we can join in the celebration and delight in God's goodness.

It's nice to have that song parked right on the edge of the apocalyptic, because it reminds us that for all the threat, all the smoke, all the danger, all the imminent expectation, underneath it all is deliverance, deliverance from evil. There you go. Full of promise.

Daniel 12 and Mark 13: How Apocalyptic Works

With that, we'll spend the rest of our time with Daniel 12:1–3 and Mark 13:1–13. It is typical of apocalyptic that it is written in very difficult times, usually under stark oppression. I'm not particularly interested in dating, which seems to me a kind of sidelight, but it is important to recognize that Daniel comes out of one of these periods later in the history of Israel. It is also important to note that Mark 13, the so-called little apocalypse, reflects the fall of Jerusalem, the most intense crisis Israel ever faced.

The dwelling place of God became a latrine. The dwelling place of God was desolated by the Roman troops. Israel poked and prodded and poked, always sticking an oar into the Roman machinery, convinced of course that it had the claim to the land and that Rome had no business there, until finally the Romans just got sick and tired of it: one rebellion after another, Israel refusing to be domesticated, refusing to submit to its Roman overlords, forever putting sugar in the gas tank. The art of sabotage comes from a minority caught in the hands of a supermajority, learning to undo it from a position of weakness.

So the Romans came in and overthrew Jerusalem, and theirs was the desolating sacrilege. The abomination was that they entered the Holy of Holies itself and relieved themselves on everything that was holy and just and good and true. It's just unimaginable. But among the

horrors people visit on one another in such times, it is fairly average. That's the kind of thing the human heart just delights in when it gets the opportunity to punish its enemies.

When we read this chapter, Mark 13, the impact of the fall of Jerusalem is so great that it really doesn't matter what the date of writing is: 65, 70, the early 70s probably, but who cares? They read Jesus' prediction of the fall of Jerusalem, of the fall of the temple, of the overturning of these great stones, knowing that it has happened. And knowing that it has happened, they see the sacrilege that has been visited on them, and with it their hopes have been dashed. All of Israel, Jews and Christians (the Christian church is just emerging, the followers of Jesus) knows the disaster. So we have a context.

Apocalypticism also claims to be a secret knowledge, given to those who are elect, who can read the signs of the times and know what is happening. So Daniel 12:1-3 is followed by the command to keep it all a secret, to seal the book. And you can see the secret motif in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus can do anything except keep a secret, and so there's always a problem.

So we have literature written in deep crisis. We have Daniel speaking of a time of great anguish, and we have Mark 13 beginning with the disciples talking to Jesus right at the temple. "And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!'" These are hicks from Galilee, fishermen from up at the north end of the Sea of Galilee. They have Capernaum in their voices, and you can just hear it. It sounds like North Dakota looking at the Empire State Building. "What wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And they're looking up. Of course the temple was one of the magnificent structures. I've seen models of it; they have a big model of it in Jerusalem. The rebuilding of the temple was one of the great achievements of postexilic Israel, and they didn't spare anything. It was just humongous. So now the disciples see it, and they are just amazed.

"And Jesus said to him," fairly coldly, I expect, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." And of course that's exactly what happened. What is left is the Wailing Wall, which you see on television now and again. That is the base of the temple. And where the temple itself stood is now one of the holiest sites in Islam, where, according to tradition, Abraham offered Isaac in sacrifice.

So there you go. This is the beginning of the trouble, and he is going to forecast more trouble. This is how apocalypticism works: it sees the crisis that is upon it, extrapolates from that

crisis, and begins to ring the changes on all the crises that are going to happen. “And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?’” Now Jesus is one of the apocalypticists. He is being asked to unfold the secret. And so Jesus does what is asked of him. He begins to tell how things are going to develop.

“And Jesus began to say to them,” first of all a warning, “See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.” Of course this is exactly what happens in these kinds of times. All kinds of people arise with insights, who want to be leaders and provide for the rest of us, and one stupid opinion is of equal value with another. They all look the same in the dark. You can’t tell one from another, and you don’t really know who is speaking, whether it is God’s voice or the devil’s. So Jesus calls first of all for watchfulness. If the voice builds up Christ Jesus, if it builds up faith and the community of faith, then it is likely to be Christ Jesus speaking. But if it builds up the speaker, Hal Lindsey and all the rest of them, then you had better guard your pocketbook, and particularly guard your heart, because you are under attack.

The Beginning of the Birth Pangs

So Jesus says to them, “See that no one leads you astray,” and then he begins to unfold the apocalypse. “And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed.” The human community is breaking down, and because it is breaking down, there is conflict all over the place: not only the normal conflict we live with day to day, but outbreak upon outbreak, contentiousness and aggression and hostility running loose. Wars and rumors of wars. “This must take place, but the end is not yet.” There’s more to come. “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom”: geopolitical, earthly conflict running rife over the whole creation, one turning against the other. “There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” That is, nature itself will be affected. These earthquakes will start shaking the foundations, with a rumble going under the earth, as the order of all things begins to break down. You see it first in the human community, and then you begin to see it in nature itself: earthquakes in various places, famines.

But now here is a very telling word: “These are but the beginning of the birth pains.” This is the beginning of labor, an expectation of something new being born. So already we can sense

that while the conflict is escalating and getting away, at the same time there is a voice, a power, moving it toward deliverance, literally.

“But be on your guard,” because this is what is going to happen to the Christians, and of course it is exactly what did happen to the Christians. “For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.” Here we go. You see the hope arising under the sign of the opposite? There is all this commotion, all this conflict, all these calamities, and underneath them is our deliverance, our movement toward a new future, our moving toward goodness. The beginning of the birth pains, and the gospel must be preached to all nations.

“And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.” Finally, you’re not the speaker. The Holy Spirit is the agent of all this, and he is watching over you as you move through it. So don’t start writing speeches beforehand. Stand there and just let the Holy Spirit deliver himself, or herself; Knudsen always used to say that the feminine is appropriate when we talk about the Holy Spirit. Be on your guard. They will deliver you over to councils. But when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, God will give you the words.

And now we start to see the whole family breaking down. “And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake.” And then one more promise: “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

Now we should look a little more closely at the calamity before we go on to the promise. What in effect is happening here, in the human community, in nature, in creation, in the family, is the result of sin, death, and the devil. Occupying powers, other forces, have taken over the creation, exploited it, and turned it hostile, and we live with this day in and day out. When Jesus describes the end times, he describes the fruition of all this exploitation and trouble. What is coming is pretty much what we see reading the paper, what we hear day in and day out, but escalated. It is getting loose, running amok, to the point where it becomes a terrible threat. And so when we read the apocalypse, generally this threat comes first and foremost.

But already, underneath the threat, we have seen another theme. It is small; it is not stated as strongly. And of course, when fear and apprehension take over, we are not likely to hear the gentle word as clearly as we might. But listen: these are the birth pains. This is the beginning of the labor, the beginning of deliverance, and we will hear it in the text that follows: “When these things begin to take place, look up, because your redemption is drawing near.” You see, it is promissory, and for the apocalyptic that is the last word. This is the end of all the exploitation, all the coercion, all the power politics, all the dog-eat-dog consumption of one another, and it is the beginning of something new, and therefore full of hope. And because it is full of hope, it can be spoken of as the gospel. Isn’t that something?

The gospel of never having to say you’re sorry, the gospel of tolerance, never was a gospel. It is being gummed to death instead of being bitten. The gospel has teeth, real teeth, because the gospel is spoken in the face of everything that contravenes it or countermands it or stands against it. It is a word spoken in the face of all the hostility, all the pretensions, all the religious phoniness, all of religion itself: me, myself, and I.

It is spoken in the face of all that, and so the first characteristic of the gospel is that it exposes the reality we live in. That’s what apocalyptic does. It tells us that progress is not our most important product. It would be the kind of church president who assures us that there is a progressive revelation and he is leading us to a new understanding of what God is doing: “God is doing something new.” Well, sexual disorder in Scripture is generally a sign of the apocalypse: it’s all breaking down. And that is not some new revelation or progressive revelation. The apocalyptic is just the antithesis of the doctrine of progress: “Every day in every way, things are getting better and better.” The apocalyptic says that every day in every way the rebellion is reaching out to further limits, and therefore God is sick and tired of it and is going to bring it to an end.

Well, that might not be good news if you’re a church president. It might not be good news if you’re looking at tenure. It might not be good news if you think you’ve got it made and don’t want to be disturbed. But for those who have been victimized, for those who are under the power of death and see it breaking in on them, for those who have suffered and lost, this is the best news possible. God is sick and tired of what is happening to his creation, and he is coming to put a leash on those powers and break them down. And as he breaks them down, he is opening the world, renewing the world, restoring the world to the garden it was always meant to be, bringing in the new creation.

The one who is speaking to us here, the one who describes the apocalypse, is the one out of whom the new creation has sprung. He is the crucified and the risen one, both. He is the one who went to his death, as the creation is now anticipating its death, and he is the one whom God raised to newness of life, just as God now, by bringing the rebellion to an end, is restoring the garden, bringing the earth to bloom again, so that all the signs of degeneration and decay, all the detritus and garbage that spins around us, will be enclosed and stopped, and the new creation will open.

So you see why these texts are so important. We don't like to talk about the end of the world, because most of the time what happens is the abuse of the text. You remember that movie the evangelicals put out, *A Thief in the Night*, in which Jesus came back like an Assemblies of God pastor to expose all the Lutherans and the other Protestants as phonies. That kind of baloney gives apocalyptic a bad name. But apocalyptic, when you listen to it, will go right down into the pit with you, right to the bottom of the pit, and it will say: God is at work here. He has not abandoned you in the pit or left you there, but is calling you out to raise you to newness of life.

So the promise starts to sing here, and when it starts to sing, it is just full of deliverance. The trick in preaching the text is to say both, law and gospel. There is the legal word that speaks of God drawing an end to the powers of sin, death, and the devil, drawing an end in a conflagration in which everything will be destroyed. But at the same time, in drawing an end, he is bringing a new beginning, and that new beginning is springtime. It is full of life, blooming even in November, even under all these clouds and all the gray.

So there you go, some fun for Sunday. God's peace to you. I will talk to you before Thanksgiving.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNnTYsaqHY8>

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