

Invitation to the Table

After today there's one Sunday left in the church year. In the liturgical calendar it's called "Christ the King" Sunday. But today is the last Sunday of the Gospel story, and it's interesting that this liturgical year began, and today it ends with Mark 13.

This text gives me hives. It's not that it's an apocalyptic text (and we'll get to that word in the sermon); it's the way apocalypse in general has been distorted so that it's no longer biblical. It's used to "scare people into faith," which is a distortion of biblical evangelism.

In the text, Jesus talks about very uncertain times: wars, earthquakes, famines... In uncertain times, we look for the things that are stable, the things that will last. In Mark Jesus talks about things that don't last: religious teachings, kings and prophets... He even said the temple, the center of their faith would fall.

In the beloved 13th chapter of I Corinthians, Paul reminds us of the one thing that remains stable throughout human history: *"Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ... And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love."*

Each Sunday we are reminded at this Table that God is love.

Our hymn of communion is #384, "Here At Thy Table, Lord"

Words of Institution

Seed, scattered and sown,
Wheat, gathered and grown,
Bread, broken and shared as one,
The Living bread of God.

Vine, fruit of the land,
Wine, work of our hands,
One cup that is shared by all;
The Living Cup, the Living Bread of God.

Pastoral Prayer

You, LORD, know us inside and out; you see whether we live up to our words.

You know when we use our power to dominate and our weaknesses to manipulate:

You know when we evade responsibility and fail to confront evil:

You know when we are seduced by fashionable dreams and pursue our desires at the expense of others:

You know when in our despair of changing the world we neglect to change even ourselves:

You know when we fail to unite spirit and flesh and forfeit our wholeness and dignity:

You know; and yet you love us. You love us and you reach out in your mercy to empower us to be who you've created us to be; to do what you've created us to do.

Minister to us in these quiet moments: where we have placed our hope and trust in things and in persons, restore our hope and trust in you.

Break us, melt us, mold us, use us in Jesus' name. Amen.

The End of Religion

MARK 13:1-8 (NRSVUE) *As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"*² *Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."*³ *When he* was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,⁴ *"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"*

5 *Then Jesus* began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

The Word of God for the people of God!

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when it happened—maybe 175 - 200 years ago—a person, or persons, unknown, broke into the church's vocabulary, where the church keeps her words, and stole one of the church's words. The word wasn't missed at first, because the church hadn't used it for some time. Still, it was a loss. It was very old, so it was prized simply because it kept in contact with the ancient church. It was a biblical word with foreign ancestry, which gave it an exotic ring and added to its value.

Of course, the church could get along well without the word; she has more than enough words for every occasion. Still, it's irritating to know something of yours has been taken and probably is being misused by someone who has no idea of its original function.

The word was **apocalypse**, and it was not missing long. It soon turned up in a group of college students at a church New Years eve watchnight service. The Bible teacher had pulled assorted biblical passages out of context and dumped them into the New Testament Book of Revelation and came up with a narrative that was thoroughly unbiblical, even though it was loaded with passages from the Bible.

The church wanted the word back, and so she took it, but not without the flavor it had acquired on its trip through the world. When the church reclaimed the word, "apocalypse", it now meant "end of the world" "second coming of Christ," "Rapture of the Saints" (which is not even in the Bible).

Some people think the church should not have taken the word back. After all, once a word has gotten out and run the streets a while, it's never quite the same. You use it in the classroom, or the pulpit and the listeners remember the last time they heard it, and immediately you're misunderstood. Great portions of the Bible had been twisted beyond recognition; but sadly those distortions are now the default understanding of "apocalypse" for much of Christianity.

When it's used in church, it retains the meanings it absorbed on the street; but the religious setting makes it sound other-worldly, supernatural. Next thing

you know, apocalypse is separated from everything that has to do with life as we know and live it day-to-day. It's used primarily to scare people into faith.

Still, I am one who favors rescuing the word; not just because it's a New Testament word but because it's an important word in the Christian vocabulary, and we don't have another word to take its place.

Today's reading from Mark is apocalypse. If there were a Walmart word that said the same thing, I'd use it. "Apocalypse". It's not that intimidating. It's just a word—it's in the movies, and we think nothing of it ("Apocalypse Now"); it's in athletics: a few generations ago, the Notre Dame backfield was known as the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse".

It's not really intimidating—until you mention it in a sermon.

Gene Boring wrote, "Apocalypse is a **particular kind** of eschatology which, in turn, is a particular understanding of the doctrine of providence." Does that clear it up for you? Let's peel the onion.

Providence: from New Testament Greek by way of two Latin words. "Pro" means "before" or "in front of"; "video" means "to look." The understanding that God is "looking out ahead." Someone is in the driver's seat. Some have distorted that to imply that God is controlling things—manipulating events, programming human behavior—we're all puppets and God is pulling the strings.

In the biblical version of providence, God, indeed, is involved in human history—God has a plan for guiding history; but humans decide whether to follow God's plan, then blame God when things don't turn out well. We fouled things up, but God's in control.

Eschatology is one way of understanding Providence. Eschatology: again, two Greek words: "eschaton", meaning "end", and "logos" meaning "word." Literally, "word of things related to the end." End, in this case does not necessarily imply "final". That New Testament word is *teleos*, the word Jesus uttered on the cross: "It is finished."

So, eschatology is the understanding that God is guiding history (providence) toward a specific goal or purpose—a specific end. Isaiah puts it this way:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God has a plan, and when humanity follows God's plan—when humanity lives out God's intended end, biblical eschatology is a joyous hope to be celebrated.

Apocalypse goes another step. It is the understanding that God is guiding history (providence) toward a specific goal or purpose (eschatology) which God himself will bring about, and which has already been revealed. Apocalypse is the last gasp clutching at straws of a people whose circumstance is so hopeless that their only options or (1) to give up on God, or (2) to say our only hope is the intervention of God. In an impossible situation, can we still trust God?

Sometimes a human apocalyptic hope expects too much. In today's reading from Mark, the disciples reflect the general Jewish apocalyptic expectation that the presence of the temple guarantees Israel's eventual return to glory.

Seven hundred years earlier, Jeremiah addressed the same expectation in relation to a different temple, Solomon's Temple: *"Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH'"* (7:4), probably a liturgical chant. Even earlier, the prophet Micah had similar words, and Solomon's temple was destroyed in Jeremiah's lifetime.

Mark's readers know of the destruction of Herod's temple in 70 CE, and Mark's reporting of Jesus' words in today's reading carry a clear apocalyptic message: sometimes a human apocalyptic hope expects too much of the wrong thing: a temple in Jerusalem, a piece of property on Hogan Lane, a new football coach, a new president... There's nothing wrong with any of those things; they just are not adequate as foundations of our expectations and our future destinies.

Nor are military power or political strategies or wealth. Looking back through Mark's gospel, Jesus has taught the disciples that he did not come to fulfill the Jewish expectation of that kind of messiah.

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And maybe—maybe—the apocalyptic model that came out of that mid-nineteenth-century college watchnight service, is one fulfillment of Jesus' warning, *"Beware that no one leads you astray."* Apocalypse is the last gasp clutching at straws of a people whose circumstance is so hopeless that their only options are to give up on God, or to say our only hope is the intervention of God. Is that where we are?

After the catastrophic war leading up to the destruction of Herod's temple and most of Jerusalem, the false prophets had said it was the end of the world. But Mark reports to his readers that Jesus said, *"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end (telos) is still to come."*

I suggest apocalypse is not a one-and-done thing that will happen in the future; rather, it is a recurring condition throughout human history that reflects humanity's failure to live out God's intentions as made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. So, will there be an "end of the world?" That phrase does not appear in the Bible. "End of the age" appears eight times in the New Testament.

There's just a lot of 'stuff' going around about "end of the world," "Second coming," "Rapture of the Saints," etc. I appreciate Marcus' approach to the Sunday School series the class finished today. I really wanted to sit in on it, but I tend to dominate, so I stayed away. The title of the Sunday School series was, *"Heaven, Hell and the End of the World: A Fun Filled Frolic through Revelation."*

I think that title reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously; that no matter what we believe or don't believe about apocalyptic expectations, we can't do anything about them, and they have become a major distraction in the church, focusing far too much time and energy and resources away from who we are called to be and what we are called to do.

I think that's where Mark ends up in this final discourse from Jesus. Don't pay attention to all those predictions and false prophets of doom. And if we read on out to the end of the 13th chapter—take in the whole of Mark's apocalypse, Jesus says, "...the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations." If we're busy working on that, we'll be ready, and the apocalypse will take care of itself.