

Proper 28B: Mark 13:1-8  
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Church of the Good Shepherd  
The. Rev. W. Terry Miller

### **The Results Aren't In Yet**

I wrote my sermon early this week, before the election results were in. Still, I knew that, regardless of who would win on Tuesday, there would be some among us who would be relieved, even excited, by the result and others would be discouraged. Actually, “discouraged” is probably not the right word. For those whose candidate lost, their defeat would be a calamity, a catastrophe, maybe even a portent of the End Times. Seriously! I heard all those things said *before we knew who won*.

And yet, we have come here this morning to worship together, to seek God’s grace together, and perhaps to hear a word from God, something that could help make sense of the momentous events we are living through.

This is not an improper hope to have. Christians have long sought God’s wisdom in interpreting the events of their day. And Christians have seen plenty of upheaval over the centuries—not just contentious elections, but civil wars and world wars, plagues and famines, socialist revolutions and totalitarian governments, religious persecutions and foreign occupation. Where was God in all this, and what was God asking them to do, were the questions our forebears wanted to know. And they turned to Scripture, to the Bible for answers.

But if you know the Bible, you know that Scripture does not offer just *one* way to interpret historical events, but three. There’s the *prophetic* approach, the *prudential* or wisdom approach, and the *apocalyptic* approach. Prophetic, prudential, and apocalyptic. The prophetic sees the present time as being a time of hardship and suffering. This is on account of our sins, with suffering as judgement for our immorality. But if we repent, the promise is, there will be blessing in the future. Wisdom literature offers a different take. It sees the present time as one of both pleasure and suffering, depending on our actions, on our faithfulness. We will be blessed if we are just and righteous, and suffer if we are unrighteous. Lastly you have the apocalyptic approach. Like the prophetic approach, the apocalyptic sees the present time as a time of suffering, but, unlike the prophetic, this is not because we are sinners, but rather because the world itself is broken, corrupt. Trying to live as faithful people, to be good in an evil world, naturally results in suffering. Still, the promise is that there will be rewards for the faithful who persevere and don’t give up or give in.

It’s not clear which of these fits our current situation. The case can be made for any of them, I suppose. You could say all that we have said and done as a people up till now has brought us to where we are. This is the attitude behind the saying “we get the government we deserve,” for better or worse. Or you could say that no matter who our leaders are, or how we got them, all governments inevitably fall short of the ideal, because we live in a fallen world. And God will judge them in the end.

This latter approach is implicit in how St. Mark viewed the turmoil of his day. Mark's Gospel, which I just read, was written, scholars think, in the 60s AD, during the first Jewish-Roman War. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, this decade was a time of great political upheaval and social unrest, institutional deterioration, bitter internal conflicts, class warfare, banditry, insurrections, famine, intrigues, betrayals, and bloodshed. Several populist leaders appeared at the time, claiming to be messiahs, and false prophets cried out woes on the city and the Temple. Christians meanwhile were being persecuted and thrown out of the synagogues. And it all came to a head with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD and the scattering of the Jews throughout Palestine and the Mediterranean.

For Mark, the proper "lens" through which to view these tumultuous events is to see them "apocalyptically," that is, to see the Temple's destruction as a great national calamity, yes, but also as signifying something more, as pointing to a greater, cosmic reversal. For the turmoil Mark's community was experiencing was not just the normal thing that happens in a violent world—stronger nations conquering weaker ones. It was in fact the first signs that the fallen, sinful world order is coming to an end. Jesus' disciples should therefore not be surprised when the structures and institutions they had come to rely on, that they thought were eternal, like the Temple, are torn down. For something new is coming, something better, that will replace the order they knew.

But even if we accept this apocalyptic approach to the events of Mark's day, that doesn't mean that every historical event since then is also of eternal importance. It's been two thousand years since the Temple was destroyed. In that time, empires have risen and fallen. Kingdoms have been established and overthrown. Presidents, prime ministers, chancellors, and kings have come and gone. Each has had their time on the world stage, effecting whatever change they could in the time they had. But no one suggests that every war or expedition, every coronation or election is critical to God's plan. More often than not, the import of events is ambiguous, their significance uncertain.

There's an old story from China that illustrates this. A poor farmer had a single horse on which he depended for everything. The horse pulled the plow, drew the wagon, and was the farmer's only means of transportation. One day a bee stung the horse and in panic he ran off into the mountains. The old man searched for him but couldn't find him. This happened in a small town in the interior of China, where nothing much ever happens, so this event was the talk of the town. Wherever the old farmer went during the next week, his neighbors would shake their heads and say, "Real sorry about your bad luck, losing your horse." But the old farmer shrugged and said, "Bad luck, good luck—who's to say?"

A week later his horse came back, accompanied by six wild horses that he had obviously encountered during his romp in the hills. The old farmer was able to corral all these fine animals, which was certainly an unexpected windfall. Again news spread throughout the village, and his neighbors came and said, "Congratulations on your good luck, this bonanza out of the sky." To which the old farmer once again shrugged and said, "Good luck, bad luck— who's to say?"

The only son of the farmer decided to make the most of this good fortune. In order to get the horses ready for selling and working in the fields, the son decided he needed to break them. But

they broke him. He was thrown off one of the horses and his leg was broken in three places. When word of the accident spread through the village, again the neighbors came, saying, "We're so sorry to hear about the bad luck, your son getting hurt and all." The old man shrugged and said, "Bad luck, good luck—who's to say?"

Two weeks later war broke out between the provinces in China. The army came through, drafting every able-bodied man under fifty. Because the son was injured, he did not have to go. This turned out to save his life, for everyone in the village who was drafted was killed in the battle. When word spread of these events, his neighbors all said, "Sure glad to hear about your luck, your boy being spared." As you have probably anticipated, the old farmer shrugged once again and said, "Good luck, bad luck—who's to say?"

The point of this story is not to suggest that we should embrace moral relativism, that we are incapable of making any judgement about good and bad, right or wrong, and should just shrug our shoulders at sin and evil—good, bad, who's to say? Rather, it is a counsel to humility, reminding us that we don't really know how things will turn out.

We do know that, in the end, God wins. God triumphs over the forces of darkness, rights the world's wrongs, and puts to shame all the liars and cheats, the faithless and cowardly, those in positions of power who exploit the weak and the false prophets who lead others astray. The truth will come out, and justice prevail. We know where God's plan is heading. But we do not know how each discreet historical event fits in with that plan.

Sure, we would *like* to know how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. So did the disciples. Which is why they asked Jesus by what signs they will know God's plan has started. Jesus replies, "you will hear of wars and rumors of war, nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines." Now that sounds clear, something like a "checklist for the apocalypse," but it's nothing of the sort. For, when have there *not* been wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, in one place or another? Instead of giving us clues to when God's plan will start, the conclusion we should draw is that signs of the End are all around us, all the time. Will it be this year, or twenty years or a hundred years from now? We don't know.

But it doesn't really matter. Because the point isn't to have a countdown to the End. The point is to make us good stewards, good stewards of our time until then. Because no matter whether Jesus comes back tomorrow or in a thousand years, we still only have a limited amount of time on this earth. And we can spend it wishing the past didn't happen or fretting over what might happen, or we can get on with the business of God's work.

Martin Luther—you know, the Protestant Reformer—was asked what would he do if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow. He answered he would plant an apple tree. That's an odd answer, don't you think? Plant a tree? Maybe he wanted to prove his diligence to God—you now, like the bumper sticker that says, "Jesus is coming. Everyone look busy." Luther wanted to look busy when Jesus returned. Maybe. But I think there's more to his answer than that. The way I see it, Luther's response is a statement of hope. For you don't plant a tree unless you are expecting to be around to see it and enjoy it, or if not you someone else. Planting a tree is thus an *act of hope*,

a hope that our good works might be useful in the new world God is creating, that they might contribute to it in some way.

Hope, in this sense, is different than optimism. Optimism is the expectation that good things will happen. But this is not really all that different from pessimism, assuming we are all doomed. For both optimism and pessimism invite passivity. Whatever the result, it is going to happen without any effort on our part. By contrast, hope is a virtue. It tells us that things *could* go well but, more importantly, it invites us to take action that might help make it happen and even make us worthy of it happening. It doesn't deny the obvious potential for calamity that always casts a shadow over our future, but it holds out the possibility that we can contribute to making the good future a reality.

Hope is, believe it or not, the message of our Gospel lesson from Mark, and it is the God's word to us this Sunday, the Sunday following the national election. For Jesus has promised that even the worst catastrophes we can imagine—wars, earthquakes and famines—are not simply tragedies, but are opportunities for us to bear witness, in our words and deeds, to the new order that God has begun in Jesus.

So no matter whether you are relieved or dejected after Tuesday's election, God calls us to be good stewards of our time, to be faithful in the moment we are living in. We know the future God has in store for us and he calls us to participate in making it a reality, even now, even here. So let's keep our hands at the plow and our eyes open, so that see what He is doing among us. Because God's work is not complete. Thanks be to God!