

Our Gospel today is fittingly for the end of the Revised Common Lectionary Year B is about “ends.” In our text from Mark this morning, we see the simple country fishers and farmers from the hinterlands of Galilee, the disciples, have come to Jerusalem with Jesus and are amazed at “the big city.”

Specifically, they are in awe at the most impressive building in all Jerusalem, the Temple. And rightly so. To understand their awe, here is some history of the temple: In the center of Jerusalem is Mt. Moriah and the belief was that on a rock outcropping there, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Later, King David built an altar there, and his son King Solomon fulfilled his father’s wishes and built the First Temple on that spot in 960 BC. The first temple was destroyed when Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar ransacked the city and destroyed the temple. The Ark of the Covenant was lost (unless of course, Indiana Jones really did recover it!) and God’s people were taken off in exile. This was an almost unthinkable horror because the temple was the one place where heaven and earth connected. It was their access to God, and it formed the Hebrew people’s identity. Without it, in exile, all hope was nearly lost.

But, God was faithful, and the Israelites did return to their homeland and some 500 years after the first temple was destroyed, the Second Temple was (re)built by Herod the Great, ruler of the region appointed by Rome. Built on the same site, the Second Temple was more than twice the size of the first. (Likely, this was to appease the Jewish population.) It had a limestone block foundation and archeologists have found blocks that are 12 meters by 3 meters by 4 meters, each weighing 400 tons. With marble floors and walls and gold leaf highlights, the Temple was massive and magnificent.

So, it’s no wonder the disciples are awestruck as they tell Jesus to check it out. But, Jesus is unimpressed and, in fact, a real Debbie Downer about it all: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

The disciples can't quite believe it and ask Jesus for details: when will this happen, and how will we know this is happening? What will be the sign?

And Jesus tells them about this demolition and destruction, and it's kind of frightening: wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines, and that's just the beginning. It kinda sounds like the world will be falling apart.

Two aspects of what's behind this text this morning are absolutely crucial for our understanding of this chapter known as Mark's "Little Apocalypse."

First: The word "apocalypse" comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis* and simply means "unveiling" or "revealing," like a curtain rising on a stage. It's the Greek title of the book of Revelation: the Apocalypse of John. What is being revealed in this kind of apocalyptic literature are events at the end of the age. There is a smattering of apocalyptic literature throughout the Bible with the chief books being Daniel and Revelation. The common element is catastrophe and the oppression and persecution of God's people.

David Lose, describes it well:

"In a nutshell, apocalyptic literature stems from a worldview that believes that everything happening on earth represents and correlates with a larger, heavenly struggle between good and evil. It therefore reads into earthly events cosmic significance and anticipates future events on earth in light of the coming battle between the forces of God and the devil. Hence, it often tries to make sense of current events and experiences by casting them in a larger, cosmic framework and in this way give comfort to people who are currently suffering or being oppressed."

Second, it makes perfect sense that Mark would employ apocalyptic literature in the writing of his book because Mark is writing to people experiencing incredible destruction and distress. Scholars agree that Mark was written around 70 AD at the time of the siege and fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the magnificent Second Temple. Rome viciously put down a Jewish uprising and leveled the city and the Temple. To this day, all that is left is part of the base of one wall of the Temple, the so-called "Western Wall," also known as the Wailing Wall, where devout Jews come to pray and place prayers on small pieces of paper into crevices in the formerly imposing edifice.

Thus the author of Mark is writing to people whose world is being turned upside down. There is disruption and uncertainty and insecurity. Their whole world has been turned upside down.

And for better or worse, here in 2024, we can relate, can't we? Like the 60s AD, there is division and distrust, injustice, insecurity, racial tension, economic strife for the poor, and enormous wealth inequality. As the old joke about the "golden rule," goes, isn't it the case that "the ones with the gold, make the rules!"

But, hear the words of Jesus: "Don't be led astray," he says, "many will come in my name" saying that they are Jesus, that they are the savior, that they are the one to fix the broken systems, that they will bring deliverance from the suffering we experience in our world today. In verse 21-23 Jesus is even more explicit:

²¹And if anyone says to you at that time, "Look! Here is the Messiah!"* or "Look! There he is!"—do not believe it. ²²False messiahs* and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. ²³But be alert; I have already told you everything.

Do you think there are false prophets today? Who would you name? Who are the false leaders of today. . . ? I won't name names, but as is the case often throughout history it's the usual suspects, those with wealth and power.

And the wealthy want to keep their wealth.

The powerful want to keep their power.

And there are those who want more power, control others, and control the world.

My wife Anna is a Russian historian. She's fluent in Russian and has spent several years in total, first in the Soviet Union and then in Russia. She told me the story that in 2014-2015 she was in Russia doing research and leading student trips, and she noticed billboards that were offering high-paying jobs to individuals with computer skills who knew English. This struck Anna as quite odd, so she asked her host what these signs were about and replied with one word: "Trolling."

In case "trolling" is new, the name comes from the practice of a certain kind of fishing, where a baited line is trailed along behind a boat.

In contemporary slang, a troll is a person who posts deliberately offensive or provocative messages online or who performs similar behaviors

in real life. As we know, now, these Russian troll farms have used social media to post all manner of offensive, contradictory and confusing information, or “disinformation.”

And I wonder if the use of our social media by Russian troll farms, and others, to spread misinformation might not be a kind of false prophet that Jesus warned us about. . . ?

Indeed, researchers at MIT found that false news travels 10–20 times faster than true stories. So might our own phones and computers be culprits in supporting false prophets spreading disinformation and downright lies!¹

If you buy this, and you have every right to disagree with me, maybe we “keep alert” in times of social upheaval by *not sharing stories on our social media!*
(*Except maybe pictures of our kids and cat videos. . . !*)

The appeal of false prophets is understandable. They tell us things we want to think, or have maybe crossed our mind about ways that we’ve been wronged or ways we’ve been disadvantaged, but false prophets ultimately want to grab power and control for themselves and don’t actually care about others.

But they are not the answer. Apocalyptic literature tells us a different story. This hopeful literature is written to the oppressed and persecuted people of God with this message:

God is ultimately in control of things, even if it doesn’t seem like it right now. Things may be bad, they might get worse, but God is ultimately in control, God will win, God will triumph.

Of course, this isn’t easy, as Drew Hart has written:

Those who follow Jesus should love our neighbors to such a degree that we are willing to accept the consequences that come from struggling for shalom and true justice in the public square.²

* * *

And in our struggle, my friends, may this message, as it did in its original context, bring comfort to distressed people who are coping as best we can with widespread

¹ <https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>

² Drew G. I. Hart, “Who Will Be a Witness: Igniting Activism for God’s Justice, Love, and Deliverance” (2020)

trauma, trials, and tribulations. May we heed the words of Jesus later in Mark 13 to “stay awake,” to stay attentive, waiting for God’s activity in the world, even as we faithfully do the redemptive work God has called us to.

As we do, we’ll see from God’s perspective, and in that hope, we will stay faithful despite the chaos and calamity around us, and, in a broken and hurting world, we will trust God and be God’s agents of transforming love.

Our hope and trust is not in Empire.
Our Hope is not in a strong man.
OUR hope is in a weak man.

So be alert, and keep watch. And hear these words of hope from the “Canticle of the Turning,” our sending song today, that we will sing shortly:

From the halls of power to the fortress tower
Not a stone will be left on stone
Let the king beware for your
Justice tears ev'ry tyrant from his throne
The hungry poor shall weep no more
For the food they can never ears
There are tables spread, ev'ry
Mouth be fed
For the world is about to turn

Thanks be to God, **Amen.**