

Don't Look for Him Until You See Him Coming
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Mark 13:1-10 (RSV)

13 And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" ² And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down."

³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" ⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. ⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁸ For 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.

⁹ "But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.

Introduction:

When I read or hear these introductory passages in Mark 13, called the Little Apocalypse or the little book about the end-times, and all the predictions and speculations these passages have engendered, I recall the story about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson on a camping trip.

After a good dinner, good conversation, and a pipe of tobacco, Holmes and Watson retire for the night, and go to sleep.

Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and reaches across to Watson's bunk and nudges his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

"I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes" replies Watson.

"And what do you deduce from that?"

Watson ponders for a minute. "Well,

Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.

Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo.

Horologically, I deduce that the time is about quarter past three. (*Yes, I had to look it up too.*)

Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.

Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe.

"But, what does it tell you, Watson?"

Watson is confused and silent for a moment.

"Watson, observe!" Holmes says. "Someone has stolen our tent!"

In other words; let's not over think things at the expense of the obvious.

Sermon:

Let me start by saying it is believed the Gospel of Mark was written some forty-odd years after the events the author records and shortly after the destruction of the Jewish Temple. The author draws upon a body of oral stories and traditions about Jesus in circulation among Jewish-Jesus communities in the Ancient Near East.

When Jesus' attention is directed to the magnificent Herodian Temple, he speaks about its destruction and therein predicts the end of his Jewish religious-political world as represented by the Temple. I quickly add that in addition to our text, the verses that follow in chapter 13, Jesus will not predict the end of "The World", but simply his world. Also, our text today will become the grounds for Jesus' arrest and his being hauled before a kangaroo court comprised of only a few members of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Jesus in Mark's Gospel with his social and spiritual sensitivities, like the ancient prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel who predicted the destruction of Solomon's Temple, predicts the destruction of the Herodian Temple.

As Mark writes, he wants to comfort and encourage those faltering members in his community of faith, exhorting them to remain faithful to their Lord Jesus. He does this by assuring them that God's hand is at work in all that is happening. Things are bad, they are going to get worse, but hang in there because soon it will all be over. God will sustain the faithful in difficult times, and God's kingdom in its fullest is coming soon. However, even if some may die before it arrives, they can rest assured of an honored place in the kingdom to come.

I hasten to mention that like the Apostle Paul and the writer of the Book of Revelation, Jesus only outlines in generalities the things that will precede the end of his Jewish world along with words of warning and vigilance. Therefore, his followers must be astute and discerning, reading and maneuvering around and within the end-time events while being faithful to God's will and ways.

I am amazed that for at least 6,500 years that we know of, contrary to solid historical and biblical scholarship and some good science, people still insist upon predicting the end-times.

I can't say for sure what the psychological dynamics are behind our fascination and preoccupation with the "end-times" and prophets of doom, unless it is our awareness that we are finite creatures, who are dependent on forces we cannot know or control. This anxiety gives rise to an incessant need to know, even if our sense of knowing comes from fear-based guesswork. It could also be because we feel helpless in a world often filled with pain, suffering, and destruction, and we seek to escape such a reality by entering a more hopeful reality, imagining a time of absolute peace, safety, and wholeness. End-times rhetoric often causes some to grasp at whatever straw floats by from whoever seems to be the most confident in such matters. It could also be that people hope to escape death; I just don't know. I do know, however, that large numbers of people across the ages have been taken in by either uninformed prophets of doom as well as false, date-fixing charlatans just as Jesus in Mark's Gospel warned.

However, be all this as it may, what is Mark really saying to his audience, and what do we have in common with his audience? First, Mark's audience is told that when they hear people claiming to be Jesus returned or some ersatz messiah shouting a fevered Adventism his disciples are to "*Watch out for doomsday deceivers*". (*The Message, Mark 13:5*) Take heed; be suspicious of such people and their messianic messages along with their press agents.

(Incidentally, Hal Lindsey, the author of the Late Great Planet Earth and other books predicting the end of the world, didn't stop contributing to his 401k or cancel his life insurance policy.)

I hasten to point out that before, during, and after the great Jewish rebellion, there were several folks who came on the scene also claiming to be The Messiah and misleading people. These folks were dealt with swiftly and brutally by the Romans. In fact, in 135 C.E. the Bar Kokhbar revolt, another Jewish, messianic revolt, resulted in those parts of the Herodian Temple that were still standing and served as a symbol of Messianic hope, getting plowed under, leaving only one western wall of the original temple - today called the Wailing Wall. Judea was renamed Syria Palaestina; Jerusalem was renamed Aelia Capitolina, and a temple to Jupiter was built on the site of the former Jewish Temple. In addition, the Jews were expelled from Jerusalem for many, many years except for one day a year - Tisha B'Av - an annual fast day that really benefited Roman propaganda while allowing the Jews to memorialize the humiliating destructions of Solomon's Temple by the Neo-Babylonians and the Second Temple by the Romans. Thus, Jesus' Jewish world as he knew it was totally destroyed, but as we know, the world moved on. However, God's good news by this time had been preached to Jews living among the nations as well as to those others who venerated the God of Israel.

For our day and time, I would add, watch out for those so-called prophets of God, who claim messianic insights and Jesus' soon return. Such people are frequently nothing more than the sum of their own fears, their lack of a true faith in God's presence in the world and/or their ignorance of scripture and its cultural and historical contexts. Some, I think are just hawking doomsday as a means of exploiting others for power and profit, with no regard for the fear and anxiety they cause others.

To those who fix dates and read signs, Mark 13:32 tells us that not even Jesus, the angels in heaven, or the "one like a son of man," spoken of by the Prophet Daniel, who is to come at the end of days, knows that day or hour. The ancient rabbis later said that date setting, because it was so destructive and disruptive, would cause the date setters to lose their place in the kingdom, when it did arrive.

Yet, on the other hand, to those who would think to sweep these passages of scriptures under the rug as nothing more than a primitive, religious fervor, and now irrelevant because the world has not ended and Jesus has not returned to reestablish Israel and God's will and ways as the center of a new-world order, I say, "Careful, careful". To such naysayers and skeptics, you may need to look around at the state of your world and check out what Jesus really meant by his predictions and the coming of the kingdom of God.

I reiterate that Jesus spoke about the end of his world, his Israelite world, symbolized in the destruction of the Temple, the center of Israel's religious-political world at the time, because it was out of sync socially, politically, and spiritually with God's will and ways. Beyond his vision of the end of his world, however, he did foresee a world coming that would be ruled by God's grace, righteousness, and compassion for Jew and non-Jew alike.

In short, Mark's insights, when boiled down, tells his church and Christians across the ages to rest assured that God is the sovereign Lord of the Universe and is at work in human history, judging and correcting the ways of human beings. Eventually, God will bring about an end to the evil, corrupt, and immoral worlds created by humans across the ages.

Look at the fall of all the so-called great empires that used force, violence, and treated people as means to the ends of the privileged few. Where are those great empires of history with all their power and promises? Where are the Caesars, the Attilas, the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Maos, the Pol Pots, et al? They are dead, judged by history, and remembered in infamy. These once mighty leaders with their god-like delusions and the people they led are nothing but

object lessons of evil, corruption, decadence, and the ungodliness of by-gone worlds; worlds that ended, crumbling under the weight of violating God's moral and spiritual laws.

I add as a footnote to these observations that with the advent of Christianity we have seen a growing global consciousness and concern for human rights, human worth and dignity, and the general wellbeing for creation and creature as in no other time in human history. Obviously, we've still got a long, long, long way to go, but we've made some progress, so hang in there, don't give up, the holy and righteous end, while now seen only dimly, is coming. Scripture is very clear on this.

In addition, to those who place their hope and faith in human institutions, whether secular or religious, with all their proclamations of certainty, I say be very cautious. Let me remind such people that Mark cites the destruction of the Great Temple in Jerusalem also as a way of saying that no matter how big we build them, how awe inspiring our edifices, what they symbolize, or how long our religion has been around, we are not to put our faith in human institutions because they too will pass away. They will pass either by divine decree or crumble under their own, bureaucratic weight as they struggle to proclaim theological certainties, which belong only to God and in a person's relationship to God in Christ.

A final word to those who would make predictions, you are wrong, wrong, wrong! You missed the point, Watson; don't over think this thing. God has not and does not encrypt God's intentions and will for life on this planet in scripture to be ferreted out and decoded over time with little theological decoder rings by arrogant, frightened mortals. God's will, as revealed in scriptures may need to be interpreted for a people in a particular time while being mindful of its original context; but scripture cannot be used as a means to predict specific dates and times in the future. Remember, soothsayers, necromancers, augurs, and all those who were believed to predict or foretell the future, were forbidden to God's people.(Lev. 19:31; 20:6) So, predictors, wise up; either live by faith in God's goodness and sovereignty, or suffer the consequences of arrogant, dishonorable fools, or said another way, "You augurs of the future, who in hell do you think you are, making pronouncements and predictions, ex officio for God, when Jesus, the anointed son, is reported to have said that no one but God knows the day or the hour of the kingdom's coming fullness.

However, Mr. and Ms. Predictors, what we do find in scripture in abundance, are the moral and spiritual insights that judge people and their institutions, who attempt to suborn the truths of scripture for self-serving purposes, be that profit, power, or escapism. But, be that as it may, God holds open to each generation all the opportunities it needs to usher in its increment of the kingdom of God, until in the fullness of God's time, whether in one cataclysmic moment or in slow, evolving increments, the kingdom arrives.

So, Christians in this day, let's be faithful in our efforts to bring in our allotted increment of the kingdom of God. Let us be on guard, astute, discerning, and watch for opportunities to proclaim and live out God's will and ways, while avoiding being sucked into the vortices of the world's ways, which may seem right but whose consequences cut people out of the kingdom to come.

God is the Sovereign Lord of Life and has made known the divine will, concerning how we are to live with one another on this planet in and through the witness of scriptures and Jesus the Christ. In Christ's ways there is life and it more abundantly, now and forevermore. So, don't look for him, until you see him coming. And, please don't over think this thing about the end-times because as the Apostle Paul said and as the father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, so clearly understood, the just shall live by faith and their faith will sustain them in whatever lies ahead for as long as it takes.

As I look around, I ask each of you, have there not been times in your lives, when your world as you knew it was ending? Yet, in the depths of our faith in God, as our worlds fell apart, we held tight, made it through the night as it were and came out into the bright day of new worlds. The just shall live by faith.