

“The Gospel Is the Most Important Thing”

Mark 13:1-13

Sermon for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost 2021; Nov. 14, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle Colorado

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It was the middle of holy week. Jesus was in Jerusalem after entering it on a donkey amid shouts of Hosanna, Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord. On one of those days, He and His disciples left the temple. One of the disciples drew Jesus’s attention to the temple buildings. “What wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!,” he said (Mark 13:1 ESV). Jesus responded by saying, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down” (Mark 13:2 ESV).

That comment must have been alarming to Peter, James, John, and Andrew, alarming, in an apocalyptic sort of way. Destruction of one’s city and temple is an apocalyptic like experience. It seems like the end of the world. So they want to know when this will happen. In Mathew’s Gospel, they ask Jesus, “Tell us when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age” (Matthew 24:3 ESV). They want Jesus to tell them signs, indications, when such things will be, so they can know, ahead of time. So Jesus begins His sermon on the end of all things.

What kind of events would be sure, apocalyptic signs of the end of the world? How about wars? How about earthquakes? How about famines and other natural disasters? Nope. Jesus says these are just the beginning of birth pangs (Mark 13:8). Indeed, these things have been happening throughout human history. In fact, in talking about wars, Jesus says that they must happen (Mark 13:7). That’s kind of depressing, but, of course, factually accurate. Wars must happen because of the evil one. They must happen because of the greed, lust, and vengefulness of human nature corrupted by sin. There will always be aggressors, who want to take from their neighbors and dominate the world; aggressors that their neighbors that must defend against by force. So there will always be war and the threat of it. But the end is not yet.

Aside from all this, I wonder how talk about the end of the world strikes us. Do we find it terribly relevant? Life is busy. Most of the time we are just worried about work, making ends meet, and getting to all the activities that seem to dominate life today. Life seems to be so much just simply trying to keep up with a weekly schedule. What relevance does the end of the world have in all that? And then when we can, we try to find time for leisure. The end of the world? Who wants to think about that?

And then there is just simply the fact that there are certain things that we Americans, as Americans and as American Christians, have not experienced and do not expect to. Yet, it is a fact of history that most other peoples and civilizations have experienced these things, though not necessarily every generation in the great civilizations of history. It is also a fact that many generations of Christians have experienced them. These things are having one’s country invaded and destroyed by a foreign army, and persecution for being a Christian. Pearl Harbor and 9/11 have given Americans somewhat of a taste of what it would be like to be invaded by a foreign power, but not really invaded and not conquered. Being invaded, conquered, or persecution, can give a person an appreciation for apocalyptic talk and realities. But since we haven’t experienced them, not on a large scale, anything like an apocalyptic experience may sound like a foreign concept.

I am not talking about our experience as Americans to make us feel guilty for not having

experienced such things. What a profound blessing from God not having experienced such things is, for which we must give thanks to God. But let us not feel entitled. Let us not take things for granted, and become complacent, especially with respect to the Christian faith, the things of God, and what is true and right.

But I think there is something deeper in the question of the relevance of the end of the world. It is that we do not live and do things contemplating the end. We go about the business and things of life, and that's alright. What else are we going to do? We should be doing that.

Yet, there is an assumption in Jesus's statement and the disciples' question that we do need to take into account. It is the assumption that all things in this world must come to an end. This present world order is a fallen creation. It is subject to death and destruction. There is evil in the world both in the source of the evil one, who can stir up tyranny and tyrants and oppression and destroy the gift of liberty, and in the source of the sinful nature, that is greedy, and lusts for what is not one's own, and wants and takes, and wants power, absolute power.

I was watching a show on Napoleon Bonaparte the other day. Because of his ambitions, he brought war to Europe for twenty years, that finally ended at the Battle of Waterloo.

And then there is God. God is working against the evils in this world. Because of its evil, this world is also subject to God's judgment, which is always operating. At the end, God's judgment will operate in a final way.

In this present world order, therefore, all things end. Life comes to an end. Kingdoms come to an end. This present world and its glories will come to an end. Jesus teaches this. He teaches it to remind us, lest we lose sight of the thing that is most important, which is the Gospel, Christian faith, and doing what is good and right in the strength and power of God's love in Christ and the Spirit.

So in the midst of the apocalyptic talk, Jesus wants to talk to us about different things than the disciples and people may expect. He wants to talk to us about being faithful to Him. He wants to talk to us about endurance. Much of Jesus's discussion about the end of the world doesn't have to do with whatever signs there could be of the end. It has to do with false Christs and persecution. "Be on guard. Jesus says. "Do not let anyone deceive you. Many will come in My name saying, "I am he" (Mark 13:5). What Jesus means is that many will arise and say, "I am the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. He says later in the chapter that many false Christs and false prophets will arise and give signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect (Mark 13:22); to deceive them into thinking and believing that those false Christs and prophets are really Jesus, so as to abandon Jesus and follow them. Be on guard against this, Jesus says.

There is only one Messiah. His name is Jesus from Nazareth. But many would be Messiahs have arisen and arise today, and will arise in the future, until the end of the age. Most of the time they probably do not talk in terms like this: "Jesus of Nazareth? He was not the Messiah. But I am. Follow Me." Of course, if anyone did talk like that, you have the instruction from Jesus not to believe it.

The more subtle kind of Messiah is the one who promises salvation within the terms and physical realities of this world. He or she will provide and lead you into that salvation if you just give him or her the power and implicit, unquestioning, loyalty and obedience. There have been many of these kinds of Messiahs, and one should expect to see many more of them. They have led people and their cultures into economic hardship, loss of liberty, tyranny, oppression, war, and destruction. It has happened time and again. They have required their followers, and civil officers in their regimes, to do really bad things.

Do not believe them, Jesus says. That is, do not believe that they are a Messiah. If they

hold office, we need to sort out what kind and level of loyalty and obedience they deserve. We need to sort this out based on God's Word and the best traditions and reasoning of human reason, seeking God's guidance and wisdom always. But do not give the kind of loyalty and obedience that is owed to the Messiah alone, who is Jesus. We are not to be carried away with their doctrine and what they teach, when it goes against God's word and the best traditions of human reason and government that we have received, lest we be carried away with false doctrine and false hope and lose sight of the Gospel and the true Messiah, and be led into bad things.

The other thing Jesus talks about is persecution on account of the Name of Jesus. Be on your guard, Jesus says. They will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues. That sort of thing is not too likely to happen to us today—being beaten in synagogues. But this could be: They will hall you before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them.

Furthermore, if being Christian or engaging in Christian activity should ever be regarded as illegal, then we have this. Brother will deliver brother over to death and father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. This sort of thing has actually happened many times over in countries where Christianity has been deemed the enemy of the state or those who rule. Expect it to happen here, if the state and those who rule adopt such an attitude toward Christianity.

And you will be hated by all for my name's sake, Jesus says. Maybe Jesus's language there strikes us as extreme. But Christians have had to cope with such circumstances before and are doing so in various parts of the world today.

So Jesus is concerned about being sure about Him, being able to endure. He wants us to be focused on the most important thing, always. The most important thing is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the midst of all the talk about signs and trouble and false Christ's and persecution, the one definite sign Jesus does give about the end is that "the Gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations" (Mark 13:10 ESV). The Gospel must first be proclaimed.

The Gospel is the most important thing. In the Gospel, you know the true Messiah, Jesus. So you know not to believe the promises and claims of any false Messiah. In the Gospel you have the strength to be able to endure whatever the world and its cultures and governments may throw at you for being a Christian. This is because in the Gospel you have God's promises which strength the heart and mind. You also have the Holy Spirit, and it is the Holy Spirit that gives you what to say in that hour (Mark 13:11) and gives you the strength to endure. In the Gospel Jesus is living in and through you to move you to hold fast to the confession of His name, and to pursue the good in the strength and power of God's love for you in Jesus.

To find this Gospel and be strengthened and grounded in it we gather as Christ's people, because we gather around this Gospel in Jesus Name. Hebrews 10:25 tells us "not to neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

So we are drawn to this Gospel because it teaches you and delivers to you how Jesus has taken away your sins for all time, once for all, in the offering of His own body as atoning sacrifice. It teaches the good news that He is risen and lives and will have the last word. This Gospel gives you the full assurance of faith to enter the most holy places in the blood of Jesus, being cleansed from all sin by His saving work for you. In this Gospel we can have the strength to say, what can human beings do to me when they persecute me for belonging to Jesus, because Jesus has the final victory.

In this Gospel we know that would-be Messiahs are false because they have not offered

themselves in sacrifice for the people to take away their sins. And having made such sacrifice, they do not sit at the right hand of God.

In this Gospel, we enter the presence of God in peace and joy, whether now, by faith, and not by sight, or then, whenever “then” may be, face-to-face.

It all comes down to this. Let us hold fast to the Gospel where it is put by Jesus to be found by us in His word and the faithful gathering of His people. It is the most important thing. For in the Gospel, whatever the end means, and when it comes, you will be ready, and you will be saved by Christ in eternal life and peace. Amen.