

## ***“Living in the Time of Not Knowing”***

*Mark 13:1-8, 24-37*

New Revised Standard Version

*\*This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

What a text we have today. It is, I believe, for such a time as this. This time of not knowing. The disciples want a timeline from Jesus. And instead, Jesus gives them a task. Keep awake!

Peter, James, John, Andrew, and Jesus had just left the Temple. Remember last week we left off with Jesus pointing out the example of the widow putting her last two coins into the Temple treasury. And yet the disciples still seem caught up in big, impressive things, as they are pointing and saying (almost like a modern-day tourist) *“Look at these big stones and buildings?”* (v1). It’s kind of an obvious comment to make if you’re in and around the Temple area in Jerusalem after being out and about around the Sea of Galilee where the biggest stones are the gravel ones that get caught in your sandals while walking. Yep, the stones are big. Good eye, guys.

In response Jesus simply says, *“These stones and big buildings? Yeah, not one of them is going to be left; they’ll all be thrown down.”*

Now I guess this silences the disciples for a bit because there’s quite a bit of time that goes by as they trek across the Kidron Valley and up to the Mount of Olives (it’s just about a mile, but it’s uphill mind you!)

And so it makes sense that they’d perch there to rest a while. Mark tells us that while they’re taking this water break, Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Jesus privately, (maybe whispering) *“Tell us, **when** will this be and **what** will be the signs that will let us know it’s about to happen?”* (v4) It feels like they’re trying to get insider information here, right? Like, *“come on Jesus, give us the inside scoop. Not just the stuff you say behind the podium in the press conferences...but tell*

*us what you really know...you know, the information that you're holding back from everyone else..."*

Jesus probably should have asked, "Do you really want to know?" But he doesn't. Instead he launches into a cryptic disconcerting teaching that has us all on the edge of our seats.

Mark 13 is often called "The Little Apocalypse," because it has some language similarities to what's called "The Great Apocalypse" of the Revelation of John written on the Isle of Patmos.<sup>1</sup> (The last book in our Bible.)

We've been hearing that word a lot recently, haven't we? Apocalypse. Apocalyptic.

March 1<sup>st</sup> - Forbes Magazine - *If Coronavirus Takes Hold In U.S., It Will Be More Than A Retail Apocalypse—It'll Be Armageddon.*

March 2<sup>nd</sup> - Newsweek - *Coronavirus will spread to 'every single state...but this is not the zombie apocalypse,'*

March 10<sup>th</sup> - Financial Times - *'It's apocalyptic': coronavirus turns Seattle into a ghost town.*

March 13<sup>th</sup> - Canada's National Post - *As coronavirus panic mounts, grocery shopping starts to look apocalyptic*

March 16<sup>th</sup> - Israel Antiquities Authority - *Fearing Coronavirus Apocalypse, Man Returns Stolen Artifact to Israeli Authorities* (I guess some good can come of all this!)

March 23<sup>rd</sup> - CNN - *Coronavirus is bringing a plague of dangerous doomsday [apocalyptic] predictions*

March 25<sup>th</sup> - The New York Times - *13 Deaths in a Day: An 'Apocalyptic' Coronavirus Surge at an N.Y.C. Hospital*

March 26<sup>th</sup> - Vanity Fair - *Coronavirus Deaths Are Reaching "Apocalyptic" Heights*

Why is everyone using the word **apocalyptic** to describe the coronavirus?

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Niell Donovan, "Biblical Commentary: Mark 13:24-37," *Sermon Writer* (2014), accessed on March

28, 2020 at <https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-1324-37/>.

Well, in part, because apocalyptic literature is vastly misunderstood. Many people dramatize it all and think it's about "end times" and a specific Christian prophecy of something called the "Second Coming of Christ." What's actually in the Bible (and more specifically the book of Revelation) often gets mixed up with pop culture, through books like the *Left Behind* series. For example, did you know there's nothing like the rapture described in Revelation at all? We're not going to one day wake up and see some people floating up to be with God while the rest of us are left here. I could go on but I won't because this is not a sermon about Revelation, but Mark 13.

One real reason for the reference could be that apocalyptic literature and language usually comes out of troubling times...times that can feel like the "end of the world as we know it." For example, the book of Daniel comes from the era (165 B.C.) when the Temple was profaned as pagan religious practices were being

imposed on the Jews. The book of Revelation comes from the era (95 A.D.) when Christians were being persecuted because they refused to worship the Roman Emperor. While apocalyptic literature might seem strange to us, the word apocalypse actually simply means (from the Greek *apokalypsis* ἀποκάλυψις) **unveiling** or (from the Latin *revelatio*) **revelation**.<sup>2</sup>

At its core, an "apocalypse" is an unveiling; something once hidden is now disclosed, or revealed.

The point of apocalyptic literature is to proclaim a message of hope, usually in coded language not understandable except by insiders, to therefore not draw the attention of hostile authorities.<sup>3</sup> It's a way of talking about an alter reality to how the world is now in a way that is hope-filled not doomsday-filled!

You can see this in verses like Mark 13:8, "*For nations will rise against nation, and*

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Nicholson, "It's the End of the World as We Know It: The Apocalypse in Popular Culture," *Mockingbird* (4 Dec. 2015), accessed on March 28, 2020 at <https://mbird.com/2015/12/its-the-end-of-the->

[world-as-we-know-it-the-apocalypse-in-popular-culture/](https://mbird.com/2015/12/its-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it-the-apocalypse-in-popular-culture/).

<sup>3</sup> Donovan, *ibid*.

*kingdom against kingdom,  
there will be earthquakes in  
various places, there will be  
famines. This is but the  
beginning of the birth pangs.”*

With a metaphor like that, you can see that apocalyptic language regards any sort of present trouble as mere “birth pangs” that will lead eventually to some kind of new life or new creation. And this language is meant to give us hope - we, who are all suffering in the here and now, somehow what we are enduring is not the end. Suffering is not the end all be all.

Because here’s the thing, if we read apocalyptic language and just think it means “the end of the world” - we are missing the point because that shows we are viewing it solely through our own linear lens of time; we are thinking of the end of *our* lives, *our history* - this moment we now inhabit. But in truth, apocalyptic language points us toward something much greater - it’s pointing us to the unveiling of “true Reality; the way things really are, beyond all our illusions, delusions, and

denials. [In this new reality] we will be made to realize that our vision has been small and clouded; that there are infinite heights and boundless horizons to the meaning of our existence, welling up from the infinite depths of God’s love.”<sup>4</sup> That holding this greater vision up before us won’t just be a fantasy but it will affect our attitudes and actions in how we live in the here and now.

The book of Revelation says in chapter 21:1-5, *there will be ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ after this world has passed away. Everything will be made new, ‘there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away,’ and we will live with God.*”<sup>5</sup> It’s a future vision that is given to us in order that we might use it to guide our present life.

And it points toward a truth about time that is not just linear, but that is cyclical and that has been around since the beginning of creation. This cycle of birth, life, suffering, death, and rebirth. We see it in nature and in the seasons all the

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholson, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Nicholson, *ibid.*

time. In spring we witness the new leaves and buds on the branches, as Jesus alludes to in Mark 13:28. This is the beginning sign that the abundant life and growth - the season of summer and joy and freedom is coming. But that season doesn't last forever does it? Autumn comes. Suffering comes. The grass wither and fades. Leaves flutter to the ground. It is preparing us for winter. For death. For the cold finality that life that is no longer. It is stark and harsh. Deeply lonely. But then. The leaf comes. The bud sprouts. We see, again, the life after death.

This same tried and true cosmic pattern is the pattern that Jesus is speaking to in Mark 13 when he is trying to answer Peter, James, John, and Andrew's question about "*When will these things occur and how will we know the time when the end is coming?*" (v4)

Jesus answers by reminding them of realities they have already experienced and will experience again - very shortly. When Jesus says "*when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, don't be alarmed...*

*nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famines, etc. - this is but the beginning of the birth pangs,*" (Mark 13:7-8) it's like he's saying "*don't mistake these things as the 'signs' of the end - these things are already happening all around you - and they always have been all around. This is not new. Don't look at catastrophic events and try to determine if they can tell you when the end is coming. It's not about the end. It's about the beginning.*"

Rather Jesus points toward the rebirth and renewal, toward the sprouting leaf on the branch, toward the fact that yes, "*heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away,*" (Mark 13:31).

What words is he talking about? Well, I think he's talking about the words that come out of his mouth directly after this. Words in verses 32-37, that directly speak of his imminent death and the suffering he will endure.

Again, remember that an apocalypse is a *revelation*, a *disclosure*. An apocalypse is something that shapes the way in which you see things. And

what's striking is that Mark places this discourse here before Jesus' passion narrative so that we can see something WE NEED to see in our OUR times of trouble. And many of the themes that appear in this chapter appear in the passion narrative itself.<sup>6</sup>

The world altering event in Mark is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. *That* is the apocalyptic moment he's pointing to here...which for us, isn't the end, right? It's just the beginning? Understanding ourselves in the cycle of birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection is just the beginning of our journey as Christians...and it's a journey that lasts our whole life long. But it's not the end. It's the beginning of meaning and understanding in our lives. We see ourselves as part of a greater story. We see our own lives reflected in the life of Jesus. And we find hope in the fact that what seems to us to be the end, is never the end.

Mark 13 is rich with revealing. Jesus talks about the Temple

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<sup>6</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, & Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 403: End of the Age," *I Love To Tell the Story* (21 March 2022), accessed on March 28, 2020 at

stones coming down, the end of the Temple as "Institution." And if Mark wasn't written immediately after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, then it was on the horizon...he could see it coming because the Romans were conquering everything.

And in the passion narrative, we'll see the veil of the Temple being torn in two (Mark 15:38) as Jesus breathes his last. The Temple as they've known it, the institutional religion as they've known it, will never be the same again! And when Jesus speaks about the coming of the Son of Man in verse 26, he speaks about the sun being darkened (v24). Well, what happens on Good Friday in Mark 15:33: "*When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land...*" You've got this sense of a cosmic shaking, and do we see the Son of Man coming in clouds with power and great glory? Well, the disciples will soon see the revelation of the Son of Man in and through the crucifixion.<sup>7</sup> That becomes the big disclosure, the Sight that gives

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1244](https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1244).

<sup>7</sup> Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

Insight. The moment that will come to shape how they see everything else - and how we do too. The cross shapes our faith in undeniable and irreversible ways. It represents the solidarity of suffering and the truth that suffering is not the last word.

And at the end of this chapter, we see Jesus' call for wakefulness. Well, what does Jesus tell his disciples to do in Gethsemane - "stay awake." Mark 14:37 "*Could you not stay awake with me one hour?*"

All of these themes run throughout the passion narrative. Mark is having Jesus enact the apocalypse that is described here in a very tangible way through his upcoming death.

Verse 35 reveals the effect of our response to this revealing: "*You don't know when the master of the house will come - in the evening, at midnight, at cock crow, at dawn.*" **This** is the story of the passion, this verse. And it's the story of our failure to "keep alert" step by step.

In the *evening*, the disciples gather for the Passover meal - the last supper, and Jesus reveals one of them will betray him. And they all say, "*Surely, not I?*" (Mark 14:17-19)

At *midnight*, at night, Peter, James, and John go out to the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus and this is where they fall asleep on him as Jesus prays; it's where he's betrayed, and arrested. And the disciples flee. (Mark 14:32-50)

At *cock crow*, Peter realizes he has denied Jesus three times and weeps. (Mark 14:72)

And at *dawn*, Jesus is brought by the chief priests and scribes before Pilate to be tried, and he stands utterly alone. Not one of his disciples waits and watches with him. (Mark 15:1)

These four words - *evening, midnight, cock crow, dawn* - they are not referring to some far-away-in-the-distance future. When Jesus asks us to "*stay alert, stay awake,*" he's merely asking us to tend to the present moment. To not worry about end times...but to be awake and alert to what is happening in the here and now.

And why do we need to keep awake? We can't we just zone out or numb out during this time when so much chaos is around us? Why can't we just ride it out in our bubble not paying attention to everything outside of ourselves? Well, because we need to "keep awake" to **give witness to the story that shapes our lives:** *Easter morning is coming. Birth is coming. Resurrection is coming. New life is coming.* And it's not just enough to hear the story and let it go in one ear and out the other. It's not enough just to sit around and wait for that dawn of Easter morning to happen passively - we must actively await that moment. Jesus says "just as servants don't know when their master will come home," we must keep awake. Not because what the servants are doing or not doing will make the master come home any sooner or later. The master is going to come home whether the servants do anything or not. Jesus will rise on the third day whether we believe it or not. (And whether we're sitting in our pretty sanctuary in our regular pew, with lilies all around us and singing the Hallelujah Chorus or not!) Life and resurrection

happens all around us - without any doing on our part - again, just look at nature.

The difference is...*if* we are awake...*if* we are attuned and actively paying attention and living our lives as if resurrection and rebirth and renewal is the reality that God wants for us - then we will experience that apocalyptic moment, that disclosure moment, that revealing moment - that Big Resurrection moment - in a whole different way. Because, we know it's Truth and have been working for it and waiting for it - we will enjoy it more and it will transform us if we live as if we know it's coming. If it catches us off guard, we run the risk of not believing it or thinking we don't deserve it, of thinking it's too good to be true, of thinking it's just an illusion or a momentary hope - instead of the real reality of our lives.

An "apocalypse" is an unveiling; something once hidden is now disclosed.

In this time of coronavirus COVID-19, in this time that everyone is calling *apocalyptic*, could it be that something

hidden is being disclosed to us?  
And I don't just mean the  
invisibility of the virus.  
Although that is certainly being  
disclosed...we are beginning to  
see it and feel it's impact in  
profound ways. And the grief,  
the trauma, the scarcity? It's all  
real, trust me, I feel it too. But  
the media and the medical  
professionals and our  
government leaders? They are  
disclosing that reality to us.  
That's their job. Our job is  
different.

Surely there is something else  
to be disclosed in and through  
this experience too? Something  
else that is being revealed to  
us? If we have eyes to see and  
ears to hear? I don't think any  
of us has the magic answer to  
this. I think we have to watch  
and listen and keep alert and  
awake and discern this together  
by asking one another, "*What  
is being revealed to you, to me,  
to all of us during this time?*"

Because it's far too easy to get  
caught up in the prevailing  
messages of fear, scarcity,  
death, and doom. And don't get  
me wrong. These are real.  
Death is real. Economic  
unraveling is real.  
Unemployment is real. Falling

stocks are real. Missing key life  
events is real. Loneliness is  
real. Not being able to hold a  
loved one's hand as they die is  
real. Not being able to gather  
and grieve is real. Doctors and  
nurses making heart-wrenching  
decisions due to lack of  
supplies is real.

This is all too real. And we  
must stay home, social  
distance, and listen to the  
science.

And yet just because these  
warnings and statistics and  
information is all real, is *this*  
the reality we live our lives by?  
Or is there a greater reality, a  
greater Truth, that is being  
revealed to us in a new way that  
might help us live within this  
time of uncertainty and  
unknowing with a bit more  
hope?

I have to admit, one of the  
reasons I've never really related  
to apocalyptic literature or  
language is that I just didn't get  
it. It sounded foreign to me. I  
couldn't relate to the urgency or  
crazy images of it. From my  
perspective, 2,000+ years later,  
the "end times" as many think  
these text speak to...well they  
never happened. Or - maybe

they happen every day - but we learn that earthquakes, wars, famines, plagues? Yes, they happen. All the time. Again - read the Old Testament if you've forgotten. But these events? They don't reveal that God is absent. What they reveal is that God is present. These types of events don't predict the end of life - they *are* life. Suffering is part of life.

But the disciples must have been like us right now in feeling like *their* suffering was the worst it's ever been...and like their world was crashing down all around them. The Israelites felt that way wandering in the wilderness, why wouldn't the disciples feel that way in Mark 13? And why wouldn't we feel it too?

Here we are - in this time of coronavirus and COVID-19 - a time of quarantine and stay at home orders - and I can finally understand the desperation in the disciples' question: "*When will we know the end is near? When will this be over?*"

That's the question I wake up with and the question I go to sleep with. *How long will this last? When will things go back*

*to 'normal?'* We know now it's weeks, not days. And realistically, it'll be months not weeks. But none of us knows the end of this. As so many medical professionals have said this week, we can try to put a timeline on this all we want. We can look at our R0 (RNaught) grids and graphs (which, if you didn't watch Governor Polis' press conference yesterday, I highly recommend it - it was the most informative thing I've seen during this crisis and helped me understand the impact of our actions today) - but even still, we can look at our R0 (RNaught) grids and graphs and look all the best information and science we have - but ***we honestly don't know when this will end. God only knows.***

And really, as the professionals are saying, it's the *virus* that will dictate when this will end, but *we* can play a role in affecting the virus' behavior by how much we adhere to social distancing. Our actions (or inactions) matter.

I think it's kind of like what Jesus is saying here in Mark, "*But about that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels*

*in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,*” (Mark 13:32) so “*Keep alert,*” (v 33) and “*Keep awake,*” (v 37). Try not to focus on the timeline, but on the task at hand, Jesus says. Only God knows the time that Jesus is speaking about - but the disciples’ actions? They still matter. Your actions still matter. Jesus is still imploring us all to stay awake, to stay alert. To listen to him. But it’s what he’s been saying to the disciples and to all of us all along?! Go back though Mark’s gospel if you want. This is not a new message for us.

Like the disciples, we are living in the time of “not knowing.” But what else is new? Haven’t we always been living in this time? Well, yes, but it feels different now, doesn’t it?

Well, it does feel different. But I think it feels different because our illusion of being in control is gone. We thought we had control of our lives and could schedule things out months in advance and plan trips and rely that when a graduation date or wedding date is on the calendar then that means it’ll happen. But the truth is - nothing is ever guaranteed in our lives. We just

operate all the time like it is. That is our norm. Planning and control. And Jesus is saying to his disciples, “*Stop trying to figure out the time and just live. Because the time will come regardless of what you do or don’t do...but don’t you want to be living to the fullest, with eyes wide open, awake, so you don’t miss a thing?!*”

Jesus doesn’t ask his disciples to plan out their lives. All he asks them to do is to stay awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. To be present with him. Not to save him. Not to keep him from suffering. But just to stay awake. To be with him. To be present. To be IN it. Fully. Here and now.

As Natalie Sleeth writes in the song we will sing shortly, “*In the end - is our beginning, something God alone can see.*” But not because God doesn’t want us to see. God, through Jesus, has been showing us this all along. The Truth of the gospel good news - that in and through suffering and death - something new rises up... something transforms... something is birthed...a resurrection is made.

We will get through this time. How do I know this? Because the story of our faith - the story of Jesus the Christ - is the story of getting through suffering and emerging on the other side. It is the story that binds us together when we feel most apart - the story of feeling at our lowest point and walking toward the tomb with grief. And finally opening our eyes to see that the stone has been rolled away.

Will we see what God is seeking to show us in and through this time?

Will we live in this time of coronavirus, this Time of Not-Knowing, knowing that the Truth of God's presence with us and within us gives us the strength to carry on, the compassion to journey to alongside one another, and the courage to rise up and transform what feels like inevitable doom and death - into life anew?

How alert we are will make a difference. How awake we stay will change the end of the story.

We've got this. And I don't say this because I'm living in

denial and about the reality of the power of COVID-19, nor am I living in the illusion that we are superhuman and beyond suffering or death.

We've got this. Because God's got us.

When we believe this, we pull together, and we rise up.

It's what Jesus taught us and what he showed us with his life. If you've never believed it before, now might be a good time to give it a try. The power of Hope and Resurrection is real. It doesn't deny or ignore suffering and death. It pushes in and through it to bring about something new.

Keep alert. Stay awake. None of us know the hour or the day. But we do know what to watch for...and, how to live.

Amen.