



The Gospel of Mark

Mark 11:1-13:36: A Healthy Insomnia?

The word “apocalypse” is chilling to some of us. It evokes images of nuclear winter, Armageddon, The Vietnam War (“Apocalypse Now”) – cataclysmic events that we would just as soon not think about. Pop cultural treatments, from Hal Lindsay’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* to Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* books and movies, are intended to frighten us. Even *Sports Illustrated* gets into the act in a weekly bit that features people who lose their perspective about games: “This Week’s Sign That the Apocalypse is Upon Us.”

Apocalypse can scare us. As we read chapter 13 of Mark’s “good news,” which is called “The Little Apocalypse,” our question is simple and clear: How can apocalypse be good news?

Conflict in Chapters 11 and 12

The prelude to the cosmic apocalypse in Mark is a very local conflict. Jesus enters Jerusalem for the first time, riding a donkey to the acclamation of his Palm Sunday crowd. That parade into the city ushers in the Gospel’s second cluster of confrontations (1:21 – 3:35 was the first). This time Jesus’ disagreement is with the Jewish authorities of Jerusalem, and this time he instigates it (rather than they), by tossing the money-changers’ tables in the Temple. “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers!”

Early in Mark, the conflicts were teacherly – about Sabbath laws and fasting and purity laws. Here Jesus begins with actions like the symbolic gestures of Israel’s prophets. He even curses a fig tree to demonstrate God’s displeasure toward fruitless Israel (11:12-14, 20-21).

If Jesus intends by these acts to grab the leaders’ attention, he succeeds. The very next morning, Jewish leaders line up to challenge him, each asking questions appropriate to their role. In order come...

- The Chief Priests, scribes and elders, asking, “By what authority do you do these things?” – by which they ostensibly mean his attack on the Temple money-changers. Jesus refuses to answer, rather telling the Parable of the Vineyard in which, his interlocutors quickly discover, they are the villains (11:27 – 12:12).

- The Pharisees and Herodians, asking whether Jews should pay taxes, drawing Jesus' famous words, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but unto God what is God's." (12:13-17)
- The Sadducees, who do not believe in resurrection, asking a convoluted question about who is married to whom in the afterlife. Jesus answers condescendingly that they have forgotten the story of Moses, "the one about the bush," in which the voice is from "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" – the living, not the dead! (12:18-27)
- Then comes a rare moment of bipartisanship in Mark, when a single scribe likes the way Jesus has answered questions, and so draws near to ask, "What is the greatest commandment?" At Jesus' prompting, he answers his own question, "Love...God...and love...neighbor." Jesus replies, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." (12:28-34) Here ends the questioning. But Jesus is not finished. As a parting blow, he attacks the scribes' interpretation of Psalm 110, reading it in a way that defines the Messiah's father as God rather than David (12:35-37), and then warns his followers to watch out for the hypocritical scribes (12:38-40).

You may recall that in Galilee near the beginning of Mark's Gospel a series of disputes so enraged the Pharisees and Herodians that they began to plot Jesus' demise (3.6). These later conflicts of chapters 11 – 12 raise the temperature in Jerusalem. Jesus' interpretive correction of the scribes will soon be turned around on him when it gets really hot: as the High Priest interrogates Jesus during the trial before the Council, his last and condemning question will be, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One (14.61)?"

The Little Apocalypse

Israel's prophets often interpreted unwelcome political events, like the exile to Babylon, as God's judgment on the king's or the people's disobedience. But how could prophets explain persecution that arose because of faithfulness and obedience?

Apocalypse is the literature of the persecuted faithful. The biblical template is the Book of Daniel, written during the persecutions of the 2nd century B.C.E. tyrant, Antiochus Epiphanes. He outlawed and punished Jewish religious acts like Torah-reading and circumcising children. Violators were executed. Antiochus' soldiers force-fed pork to the Jews and defiled the Jerusalem Temple. Amid this terror, the Book of Daniel invited readers to imagine "one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds" to turn things around.

Mark picks up that thread from Daniel. After a time of great persecution and then cosmic upheaval (13:13-19; 13:24-25) Jesus pictures "the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory" (13:26) to intervene on behalf of the faithful. When the disciples wonder when (13:4), Jesus tells them it will be easy to get fooled about this calendar. Imposters will further confuse matters, claiming to be the Messiah and fooling some of the faithful (13:3-6, 21-22). Jesus will not commit to a time: "About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (13:32)

Delay is an issue. By the time Mark writes it has been nearly 40 years since Jesus entered Jerusalem. How should the faithful respond to that apparent delay of the end? The command of Jesus is clear: “Keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.” A last sentence moves the meaning from Jesus’ disciples to Mark’s group and beyond: “What I say to you I say to all: ‘Keep awake.’” (13:35-37)

Can Mark’s apocalypse help us, nearly twenty centuries later? The answer to this question depends on what Mark wanted to see happen in his community. In the course of this chapter, Jesus tells his disciples not to be fooled by imposters or cataclysms into thinking the end has come (5-8). But on the other hand, he calls the Christians to vigilant watchfulness (35-37). He doesn’t want them jumpy. But he does want them attentive. In the meantime, amid hardship, he calls them to trust the support of God’s Spirit (11). It’s a sort of healthy insomnia – a refusal to lapse into sleepy complacency, despite being short on answers about God’s plans.

Jesus points the way forward for us in another way as well. Amid persecution and distress, Jesus proclaimed to Mark’s ancient Christian group a truth worth knowing: God holds the future. For us, living amid global uncertainty, with weapons of mass destruction in the hands of unstable forces, we could use our own assurance. God holds our future, too. With that assurance, Jesus calls us to a trusting, attentive faithfulness now. Good news!

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