

New Life through Baptism at Zion

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As chapter 13 of the Gospel of Mark begins, Jesus is still at the Temple, but the theme has changed. He is no longer focused on models of generosity, but the urgency of history. Where are things heading? Is it revolution or apocalypse that's coming around the bend. The poor widow at the Temple Treasury gave all that she had to help others in need. But Jesus warns that the days are coming, and are already here, when all the wealth stored in barns and banks will have no value, not because we fear that all our banks and barns are being overseen by Bernie Madoff, but because the judgment God has promised in calling us to account is on its way. This judgment day cannot be stopped and will not be delayed.

Jesus had just drawn the disciples' focus to a poor widow's generosity, reinforcing his pattern to address matters of accumulated wealth and personal stewardship with more than a quarter of his teachings. Like most of us, their eyes quickly glazed over, and then came to refocus on local architecture. "Hey, look at those bricks! Aren't those stones impressive? These buildings will last forever!" "Don't count on it," Jesus responds, and then he offers a glimpse of a future that is already unfolding for Jerusalem and the world. "Take a long look at these buildings. Not one stone will be left standing; all will be thrown down." (Mark 13:2) And they were, with the Roman army's siege and assault on Jerusalem sometime between the years 66 and 70 AD, not long after the community that treasured Mark's Gospel had fled into the hills for cover and protection.

The Gospel of Mark had yet to hit the presses. It was just at the stage of being finished, when the Markan community of disciples found themselves right in the middle of Jesus' words about the Temple in Jerusalem coming true. According to historical accounts, the Gospel of Mark was written for Christians who were fleeing Jerusalem toward Galilee and beyond right as Roman armies were converging on the holy city to suppress yet another local revolt. Circumstances were similar to when the *Book of Daniel* was written, during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, in the middle of the second century before the birth of Christ. While the Romans were somewhat less oppressive than the Persians who vied with Egypt for dominance in the Middle East in Daniel's day, the results for Jerusalem were the same – military defeat, political oppression, and religious persecution.

Christians living in Mark's day considered their tumultuous times to be very similar to the times described in the Book of Daniel almost two-and-a-half centuries earlier. Religious institutions were under assault ... literally. Economically, the rough times of our recession couldn't hold a candle to the financial imbalances that characterized the ancient world. Politically, change was everywhere in the air as Roman armies extended their presence on the ground, tightening the Empire's grip eastward through Asia Minor and south through the Middle East into Egypt and Africa. Jesus would surely be right

when he warned that not one stone from the historic temple in Jerusalem would be left standing here in this 13th chapter in the Gospel of Mark.

This section of Mark is called the “little Apocalypse,” which is an oxymoron, kind of like saying that someone is *a little dead*, as if there are degrees when it comes to being dead. An apocalypse is a bad thing. “Little” has nothing to do with the apocalypse, but with the relatively small amount of space that Mark’s Gospel set aside to describe it. Sometimes less is more. You will hear of “wars and rumors of wars.... Nation will rise up against nation.... There will be earthquakes and famines ... and this is just the beginning of the birth pangs.” (Mark 13:7-8) Alarming persecutions, desolating sacrilege, great suffering: “if the Lord hadn’t cut those days short, no one would have survived.” (Mark 13:13) Then Jesus quotes Daniel: “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will cease to give light, and the stars from heaven will be falling, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. They will see ‘the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory’... and the angels will gather the Elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the heights of the heavens.” (Mark 13: 20, 24-27)

With many of you, I am well aware that the themes introduced by Daniel, and reinforced by Mark, continue to animate apocalyptic preaching that fills our radio waves on Sunday mornings, and has to some degree influenced us all, as we wonder if the circumstances of these present days signal to the world that the end is near. For some, it has been the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948. For others, it is the great financial collapse of last October, now working its way through record unemployment. I remember reading that the ten crowns on the head of the Beast in the Book of Revelation – which, for the record, is the “longer” Apocalypse – referred to European Union, which for a brief moment back in 1980 had grown to include ten member nations. Unfortunately, God was unaware of the narrow window He had to bring on the apocalypse, because the European Union quickly grew to thirteen, and now has twenty-seven member nations.

Unlocking the secrets of apocalyptic warnings has fascinated faith and inspired films for as long as there has been faith and films. The simple truth is that our lives are awash in a sea of fears, fears that are longing for direction. Martin Luther lived in a day that saw the church dividing, Moslems from the east invading, kingdom rising up against kingdom, chaos breaking out everywhere, at Luther’s doorstep with the spirit-filled Enthusiasts within his borders, and the armies of the Holy Roman Empire entering Germany from without. In that calamitous world, Luther chose trusting God’s grace over giving in to the fear of God’s judgment. Luther clung to the clarity of the Gospel precisely because the drum beat of judgment beat so fiercely, within his heart and throughout the land. He didn’t choose to believe the Gospel of God’s grace because he was an optimist who could see the silver lining in every stormy cloud. He saw the Gospel in the Scriptures. It was there in the writings of Paul, in his study of the Psalms, from beginning to end, that God was revealing the Good News of His gracious love for all who would believe in and trust God’s boundless mercy. There is not a God of angry wrath in the Old Testament and a

God of perfect love in the New. There is not a God of fierce judgment for the wicked and a Lord of love for the Chosen. There is One God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His life that we might live, who suffers the world's burdens rather than inflicting more.

I am not going to use these texts from Daniel and Mark to frighten you into faith. I am *under orders*, as an *ordained* minister in the Lutheran wing of the Christian Church, to proclaim the Gospel as the truth about God's judgment and the truth about our future. I am not here to burden you with the Law that defines and inspires our guilt or shame. I am called to proclaim the truth of the Gospel as the core of our faith and the key to salvation. Luther made it clear that it's not enough to know the Bible line-by-line. We must be able to see the Good News of the Gospel shining its light into our hearts through the message that Scripture proclaims. If you want fear and judgment, if that's what you think brings out the best of *good ole-time religion*, then you'll have to find that message somewhere other than a Lutheran church, because that is not the truth about God or God's presence in our lives, and it is not the truth about the future that awaits us, a future that has already begun as we trust God's grace and live Christ's love.

This is the Good News we celebrate with the Baptism of Max Owen Kitzmiller. We lift up the Good News that the key to salvation does not reside in who we are or what we bring to the table in our relationship with God. It's not about the decisions we've made, the deeds we've done, the impressive record of accomplishment we've amassed. These are surely good stuff; but the message of the Gospel that we celebrate with Baptism, and the Good News we receive in Holy Communion, is about the grace that God gives, the love that forms God's heart, the mercy that defines everything God does, and the faithfulness that serves as the measure of God's every promise. Lutherans baptize unknowing infants precisely to reinforce the Good News that our salvation is God's doing – by grace alone, through faith in Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Earlier this week I received a call from a young man who asked whether he could be baptized. He had read the Scriptures. He believed the message. He repented of his sins. He prayed for God's guidance and the Spirit's strength to help him lead a righteous life. Could he be baptized? Would we baptize him? Before I could respond, he asked about our equipment, our baptismal equipment. Could he be fully immersed, since that was "the right way" to baptize. I told him that Baptism isn't about our choice, but God's. Baptism isn't a celebration of the decisions we've made, but of the deeds already done by God in Christ. Baptism isn't about our being worthy, but God's being gracious. It's not about who we are, what we do, or how we do it – whether by sprinkling or full immersion, in the name of Jesus or the Triune God. It's about God's grace, God's love, God's promise, God's faithfulness. That's the Good News we celebrate with Baptism. That's the Good News I am *under orders* to proclaim, gladly obliging, as one called and commissioned to lift up God's grace as the truth of the Gospel, extending the wide embrace of God's love, which is ours to receive and enjoy, now and forever ... in Jesus' name. Amen