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Church of the Good Shepherd
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Mark 13:1-8

Good morning Good Shepherd!

So, last weekend I told my pastor that I was preaching this Sunday on the lectionary passages and he said (not very reassuringly, I might add) AH! Jesus's little-apocalypse! Good luck with that one." Thanks, pastor. And Christine. Even the prolific Bible commentator William Barclay - who I always go to first when preparing a sermon acknowledges that *"Mark 13 is one of the most difficult chapters in the New Testament or a modern reader to understand...because it is one of the most Jewish chapters in the Bible. From beginning to end it is thinking in terms of Jewish history and Jewish ideas"*

In other words, to truly understand (or as the wonderful science fiction writer Robert Heinlein would say: to grok) what Jesus is telling his disciples here one really needs to comprehend the ancient Jewish understanding of the End Times and what the phrase "Day of the Lord" really meant to them. You could do a deep dive on these topics by starting with Amos (3), Isaiah (13), and Joel (3). But I warn you - be prepared that all that will lead you down the inevitable rabbit hole of "is Christ talking about the near future (within the lifetime of the first century church, aka preterism in seminary circles) or the far future (aka futurism). It's a LOT. Some scholars spend their entire lives trying to work all this out.

I have 15minutes.

So let me start with this mostly true story: When I was a youth pastor, I was leading a study on the Book of Revelation, and one of my students came up to me at the end of one of our first small group meetings to confess that they didn't understand what the word "apocalypse" meant. I quickly reassured them, "Relax, it's not the end of the world..."

You laugh! But while our Oxford Dictionary may define the word Apocalypse as *"the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation"* that is NOT what the first hearers and readers of this ancient scripture understood apocalyptic literature to be. The Jewish Encyclopedia tells us that the word Apocalypse in early Jewish and Christian literature, was actually a *revelation* of hidden things given by God, usually in a written account. It's meaning is actually closer to a *revealing* or *unveiling* of knowledge. So, my classic Dad joke is actually accurate. Keeping this in mind, let's unpack our Gospel reading this morning and see what Jesus is *revealing* to us, today.

Our passage starts with the disciples marveling over the enormity of Herod's temple. A temple that had been under construction at that point for close to 50 years. It measured 500x300 YARDS - that's 5 football fields by 3 football fields - and covered 35 acres of ground. The ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us that the individual stones measured 60' long x 11" high, 8feet deep and weighed over stone weighed over a million pounds. And that's not hyperbole - the largest one we've found is in the Western Wall tunnel and is 42'long x11' high x 14' deep, and weighs 660 tons - that's 1,320,000 POUNDS.

Historians of the time described the temple as a "mountain of marble covered in gold" surrounded by a 150' tall wall. It seemed to be impregnable, and yet Jesus tells his disciples "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." And they

were. Forty years after Christ was crucified. Only a part of the Western Wall remained standing after the Roman's destroyed the city and temple in 70AD.

So, Jesus makes this astounding claim that one day "not one stone will be left here upon another" which led Peter, James, John and Andrew to ask Him privately and probably rather anxiously "When will this be? What will be the sign that this is about to happen?"

But rather telling them signs of the end of the age, Jesus focuses on what are NOT signs of the end. Jesus calls false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famines, "not signs, only the beginning of birthpangs. In other words, these things are simply characteristic circumstances that we're living in between Jesus Christ's first coming and his second coming. And although we can expect them to get more intense as we draw nearer to his second coming--like birth contractions--the existence of these things is simply part of the age that we live in. This bears repeating: *Wars, false messiahs, earthquakes, famines, and persecutions are not signs of the end.* They are simply signs of the times.

So when Mark's readers see these kinds of things happening during the Jewish rebellion – which they DID - Jesus is warning them not to freak out. We know from history that these things did happen in the years leading up to the Jewish rebellion. Many false messiahs stepped up and claimed to be the Christ. And we know from Roman historians that this period of Roman history was full of conflict and crisis. There were earthquakes throughout the empire, famines in the region of Judea. And during the Jewish war against Rome, Christians were caught in the middle of it all.

But what Jesus is saying here is that THAT is all noise. That part of life? Wars, rumors of war, famines, earthquakes – we could add hurricanes, wildfires, illness, pandemics, death, grief, even elections.... It's all just part of life between the time that Christ first walked the earth and when He returns. Do. Not. Be Distracted. Rather, keep watch. Stay awake. STAND firm.

In the midst of chaos and swirling rumors of destruction, Jesus tells the disciples not to engage in the apocalyptic zeal going on all around them. This speaks to us as followers of Jesus even now. No matter what is going on out THERE, as Christians, our assignment has not changed. Like Jesus, we have both opportunity and a mission to be with and serve others. Instead of getting drawn into a mob mentality—blindly following others and being affected by their hysteria—we can focus on what is right in front of us and show others how our transformational relationship with God gives us strength and hope in uncertain times.

Paraphrasing a bit on what Blake Lasaster, an UMC clergyperson posted recently: *Whatever you are going through - **Your calling has not changed, your life's work still remains.** Like Esther, God has called you for such a time as this. You may feel powerless, but you are where you are because God believes, in that position, you can save God's people with your quiet daring and courage.*

Like humble disciples you will make your way thru a world that persecutes you, and yet, you will continue to heal (yourself and others), to comfort (yourself and others), and to build.

Like Job, you will weather grief and not let the disappointment turn to bitterness.

Like the prophets you will find your voice to shout against all injustice and oppression, and you will roll up your sleeves to fight poverty and suffering.

Like so many who have come before you, you will dedicate your life to feeding the hungry, comforting the lonely, sheltering the homeless, and clothing the naked. With each act of kindness you are shouting to the darkness, "He cannot be overcome!"

Do not be afraid, and do not grow weary. For you are a child of God, called by name for all the work that lies ahead.

Robert Frost once wrote: *In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: It goes on.* And so does our mission. Jesus is Lord. Nothing changes that. The work of Christ does not stand or fall with any natural, political or personal upheaval.

Jesus calls us to participate in His work of love - to do justice and love mercy, to care for orphans and widows, to lift up the downtrodden, care for the marginalized and make space for the excluded.

When you feel overwhelmed by the weight of the world, be glad to be part of a church that is working for justice, mercy, and love. There is a lot in this world that we can't control. But we can take the next faithful step – doing the work of love in our communities.

The theologian Georgia Harkness once said: Love cannot remain abstract. It must have concrete expression in action." This love compels us to work together for justice, to confront unjust systems that harm the marginalized and to create a world that reflects God's shalom.

I know that last week Christine mentioned all the beautiful ways that Good Shepherd has served its vulnerable neighbors over the past year. As today marks the end of our Feed a Family collection I would just like to remind you what a blessing it is to share out of your own abundance to help local families celebrate Thanksgiving. According to Fairfaxnow, food insecurity is on the rise here in Fairfax County. There are tens of thousands of folks going hungry including 8,000 children and 24,000 seniors. Supporting this outreach event is a concrete expression of God's love.

As the writer of Hebrews shared with us this morning: *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, but encouraging one another.*

Friends, I leave you with this: Ignore the noise. Do not be afraid. No matter what you are going through in your life, your mission is still the same. In the spirit of that good Anglican priest and founder of my denomination, John Wesley – "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

That pretty much covers it. Amen?