

**Deut. 4: 32-40**

**Mark 13: 14-27**

### **Talk About Suffering**

#### **Story #1**

Our daughter and son-in-law took our two grandsons to Discovery Place

in Charlotte not too long ago, to see a LEGO exhibit there.

The boys are 3 and 5, which effects what they consider to be exhibits, or not,

and what they consider to be part of the museum, or not.

And while they were mildly interested in the LEGO exhibit inside the museum,

what really caught their attention was the street preacher

outside the museum, who was traversing the downtown sidewalks

emphatically yelling the "good news" to passers-by

as he wildly waved a placard in the air that said, "Jesus saves".

That was the best part about Discovery Place for our grandsons!

And when they returned home, they pulled out sheets of white paper,

and ran around wildly waving them and yelling, "Jesus saves! Jesus saves!"

Known as the Little Apocalypse, Mark 13 is a wildly otherworldly interruption

into our orderly discovery places.

It speaks of wars, persecution, desolation and earthquakes;

of the sun darkening, and stars falling from the sky;

and of "the Son of Man coming in clouds

with great power and glory" (Mark 13: 26).

We call these wild, otherworldly texts *apocalyptic*, which can mean different

things to us, based upon our worldview.

Through the worldview of Hollywood, the word *apocalyptic* conjures up visions of extremely dire events such as nuclear confrontation  
or rogue asteroids colliding with earth;  
of alien invasions and of zombies roaming the streets!

They speak of "the end of the world as we know it". (period)

To those with a sacred inclination, however,

*apocalyptic*, coming from the Greek word meaning "revelation",  
conveys the mysterious revelation of hidden things.

At the top of that list, of course is God, "the One who hides",  
according to Isaiah (Isaiah 45: 15), and then Jesus Christ,  
the hidden essence of God's love made flesh.

Furthermore, the apostle Paul tells the Colossians that even our human lives  
are hidden with Christ in God. And that when Christ, who is our life,  
appears, then we also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3: 3-4)

Therefore, for those of us with a sacred inclination, *apocalyptic* means  
a mysterious unveiling of supernatural things previously unknown;  
or the events surrounding cosmic transformation of a radically different order;  
or a total galactic shut-down and reboot of the underlying order of things-as-they-are,  
to bring about the necessary radical change *that only God can bring*.

Theologian Ernst Kasemann famously called apocalypticism the  
"mother of all Christian theology".

(Kasemann, Ernst. "The Beginnings of Christian Theology." *Journal for Theology*

*and Church 6* (1969; orig., 1960). p. 40)

It's a mother, all right! It's a mother giving birth to something vastly beyond the limits of our wildest movie-minds.

And with its discomfiting stretching of our imaginations, apocalypticism provides the kinds of language and imagery for the tension that Mark sees at play between two sides of the same story: our human struggle with the powers-that-be, and God's divine action for the salvation of the world.

(Placher, William. *Jesus the Savior*, p. 117)

So I want us to think about that dual emphasis here on human struggle and divine salvation, which caused the early church to embrace apocalypticism as a source of urgency, readiness, expectation and hope, noting the "already" and "not yet" aspects of its gestation.

## **Story #2**

Do you remember the ritual of healing and wholeness we held during worship here on July 14<sup>th</sup>?

Cards were enclosed in your bulletin, for you to write down your prayer requests, and then bring them forward at the appropriate time for a laying on of hands and a blessing of healing.

We collected those cards at the end of the service, and passed them out at our next staff meeting to lift your concerns up as our prayers of the people.

We prayed with you as we lifted up your concerns to God.

There were more than 50 cards, and each contained many names and

situations for which you begged God's attention and intervention.  
Never would I have imagined how poignant the reciting of your requests  
would be for us!  
It brought tears to our eyes to hear your many concerns being voiced,  
knowing the pain that lies beyond each request; knowing the suffering  
that each of us shoulders in this life, but manages to hide so well.

You gave voice to your human struggles with the powers-that-be:

parents worried about a son recovering from addiction;  
a mother physically exhausted from caring for both children and aging parents;  
someone deeply grieving, homesick, over the loss of a home;  
a young adult fighting depression; another, anxious about the future;  
someone battling cancer; another, fearing a recurrence of cancer;  
a wife trying to cope with her husband's progressive memory loss;  
much concern about immigrants in detention at our border,  
and those threatened by recent ICE raids;  
concern about our children in trauma, about their children in trauma,  
and the health and mental health of any children who are unloved,  
unwanted and abused;  
concern about the beauty of the earth, and the changing face of our  
beautiful planet due to global warming and climate collapse.  
Jesus' people fleeing to the mountains, or sheltering in place on their rooftops,  
or dashing away without a coat in winter, or pregnant, or nursing  
during great upheaval are not very different in their suffering

from our fleeing and fearful immigrants and refugees,

from our anxious or depressed ones,

from our addicts looking to self-medicate their pain,

from our sick, in body, mind and spirit whom you specifically named.

And oddly, I find it comforting, that Jesus, that first century street preacher,

wildly waving these otherworldly words, just might be giving us

the words we need to hear.

His apocalyptic words, perhaps, afflict the comforted, yet they comfort the afflicted,

for they are words of God's radical shake-up and change,

words of Jesus' powerful and glorious return; in other words,

words of the hidden God being in control despite appearances to the contrary.

And that is salvific, because it is hopeful, that Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

The Blind Boys of Alabama, who sing from the good Gospel tradition in America,

have a woeful song entitled *Talk About Suffering*:

*Talk about suffering here below, and let's keep followin' Jesus.*

*Talk about suffering here below, and let's keep followin' Jesus.*

*The gospel train is comin', now don't you want to go?*

*And leave this world of sorrow, and troubles here below.*

*O can't you hear it father? And don't you want to go?*

*And leave this world of sorrow, and troubles here below.*

*Talk about suffering here below, and let's keep followin' Jesus.*

(Ricky Skaggs, *Skaggs and Rice*, 1980)

It gets at the heart of what Jesus is trying to convey: "that suffering produces

perseverance; perseverance character; and character, hope.

And hope does not disappoint us." (Romans 5: 3-5)

Suffering is not the end of the end-story, friends.

So, let's talk about suffering, and let's talk about the hope and salvation beyond,  
because that is the desired end of Jesus' street preaching.

### **Story #3:**

Have you ever thought you were witnessing the second coming of Jesus?

The closest I have come was the time that I got a wild hair to go and see

the French Supersonic Concorde land at RDU in the mid-80's

with my then two small children, Emily and Andrew, in tow.

Back then, in the pre 9/11 world, you could park your car alongside the runway

and watch the planes land.

So we left our car on the side of the road, and joined the crowd gathered

along the chain-link fence that bordered the runway,

as the massive dove-like airplane approached.

The first thing that we saw, however, was not the white plane itself,

but the rolling clouds of red dust that preceded it, billowing down the runway.

Holding Andrew on my hip, and Emily by the hand, I thought to myself:

this must be what it will look like when Jesus comes again in roiling red clouds

with great power and roaring!

But when the plane itself emerged from the red clouds, and the explosion of its

engines shook the earth and drove us to duck and cover in terror,

I wanted to flee to the mountains with my screaming children

and protect them from this unimaginably massive beast.

Lord, save us! We could not get away fast enough!

Lord, save us, indeed. When these things start to happen, when bad goes to worst,  
when the earth shakes beneath our feet,  
when the storm clouds of life come sweeping over us,  
when the glaciers of civility and respect rapidly melt,  
when hate heats up and manifests as verbal and physical violence,  
when the carbon footprint of narcissism is behemoth,  
when chaos seems to overtake order,  
what then shall we do to be saved?

Jesus says that when God's cosmic shake-up occurs, there will be suffering, for sure.

But, for the followers of Jesus, *for those who continue in the daily disciplines*

*that cultivate love and that promote agendas of "we" over agendas of "I",*

those who stay alert and refuse to be led astray by false messiahs and false prophets,

the Creator of the ends of the earth will limit and shorten their suffering.

"Though weeping remain for a night, joy will come in the morning!" (Psalm 30:5b)

In other words, where there is judgment, there also will be grace and hope.

"Hope is a state of the mind, not of the world," said Czech dissident Vaclav Havel.

"It is an orientation of the spirit and orientation of the heart...."

In short...the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one

that can keep us above water and urge us to good works,

and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit

and its efforts, is something we get, as it were from 'elsewhere'.

It is also this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless," Havel said.

(Havel, Vaclav, *Disturbing the Peace*, p. 181-182)

Friends, in the midst of upheaval, the hidden and mysterious God remains sovereign and is mindful of those who stand firm in vigilance, in readiness,

and in faithful good works, even though the way forward is obscure.

Nevertheless, Jesus' call is *to live life in daily practices of readiness with love and joy.*

Our musical guests this morning, the Ready Singers, are a testimony

to Jesus' appeal for both readiness and joy.

As Dr. Mickie Efird, our itinerant Duke Divinity street preacher is fond of saying,

"Cheer up, things will get worse!"

Nevertheless, the hidden God who loves us, the hidden God who made us,

sent his son, Jesus, to gather the faithful to himself from the four winds

and from the ends of heaven and earth, and be with us always,

even to the end of the age. Amen.

- Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
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