

As The World Is Shaken

A sermon on Mark 13 & Isaiah 64: 1-9 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 November 2020

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Message

Jesus calls us to resist the satanic desire to credit violence and disaster with meaning, and instead to acknowledge meaning and truth only in God's suffering love and mercy.

Sermon

I have a different kind of sermon for you today. An imaginative relocation and retelling of the 13th chapter of Mark, part of which we heard read. I hope it works! Here goes.

One of Jesus's disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, isn't the modern world amazing?! You can just hop in an aeroplane and be on the other side of the world in 15 hours. The internet allows people to work for companies in Melbourne while living on the beach in Bali. And countries are all connected to one another in a booming global economy with levels of international cooperation never seen before. Talk about progress!"

But Jesus replied, "Don't get sucked in by it all. Much of it is a house of cards. You watch how quickly it all falls apart. You can see it coming if you look, on the horizon: global pandemic, climate catastrophe, political collapse. People will hide in their homes wearing masks, terrified of one another, while others will refuse to believe anything is happening even as they fill the hospitals and morgues to bursting. Extreme weather events will come faster and faster: monster bushfires, horrendous floods, the fiercest hurricanes ever known. Nations that promoted themselves as the beacons of democracy will elect despots who will hold them in thrall with showmanship and make-believe optimism while sabotaging the democratic structures and replacing them with a religious personality cult. And growing numbers of people will find it easier to believe in the most bizarre conspiracy theories than to trust even the most respected news media. Disaster upon disaster."

There was shocked silence for a while, until eventually four of the disciples plucked up the nerve to take him aside and question him in private. "Can you tell us when this will be? And what does it all mean? Will there be clues we can watch for that will tip us off when God is about to set it all in motion?"

But Jesus replied, "Don't get sucked in by people who think they can tell you that there is some grand meaning in it all, and that if you just follow them and subscribe to their pay channel you'll be in the know and have the inside running. Charlatans! Bullshit artists, the lot of them. You will hear of terrible wars and shocking war crimes. They're not God's doing. People have always done this stuff. A global pandemic will kill millions and send the world back into its bunkers, slamming the doors. You won't be going anywhere on those aeroplanes. But this is not God's doing; it's probably not anyone's doing, not even some secret laboratory in China. A new world is being born, and the old one is caving in on itself, but the structures of the old are toppling all by themselves. You don't need to look for some divine hand to explain the crash.

"As for yourselves, beware. The world will be increasingly divided into hostile factions who can barely tolerate each other's existence, and everyone will be expected to conform unquestioningly to one faction or another. A rising cancel-culture will silence dissent and

shame and ostracise anyone who doesn't seek shelter in the solidarity of a mob. And if you take seriously what I am saying, standing firm for a culture of mercy and truth, and don't get sucked into swallowing whole the propaganda of your preferred side, they'll crucify you for it. Without a powerful mob to hide in, you'll be spat on in the streets, trolled to the point of breakdown on social media, and probably put on the national security watch lists.

“Don't worry if you can't answer all their allegations. Most of them make no sense anyway, and it's almost impossible to talk people out of their conspiracy theories. So when they get stuck into you, don't try to argue the truth. Just speak whatever the Holy Spirit gives you at the time, for the words the Spirit gives us are always words of grace and truth and love and mercy. It is love and mercy that have the best chance of breaking through, not scientific proofs or researched evidence. These people have drunk the cool-aid on all that.

“Likely as not, you'll even cop it from within your own families; churches too. Sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts, divided up and at war with each other over whether it was the virus that killed grandma or it can't have been because it doesn't exist; over whether to believe the election was a massive but perfectly concealed fraud or that the orange emperor had to go; over whether it is all God's punishment for abortion and gay marriage, or the result of right wing denialism. And it will be even worse if you don't sell your soul to either side. Then you'll really be alone, and hated by everyone. Hang in there though, because the hope for a solution has nothing to do with either side.

“But when they require you to bend the knee before the holy war machine, it's probably time to cut and run. When they place a handgun on top of a Bible and tell you to salute it as a sacred symbol of protecting freedom, get as far away from there as you can. Total sacrilege. When they claim that only bombs and guns can save us, and that peace can be won through the violent destruction of those we deem enemies of peace, it's time to go AWOL. And when they tell you that soldiers murdering civilian prisoners is just the unfortunate but tolerable price of protecting our freedom, or that it is just a few bad apples rather than a known consequence of repeatedly sending traumatised soldiers to a dehumanising war, its time to pull down the flags and transfer your citizenship to the kingdom of the Prince of Peace.

“The worse it gets, the more self-styled prophets you will see jumping up and down, claiming to know what it all means, offering the most fantastic religious theories. They'll tell you that God has anointed their preferred emperor to bring down the wrath of God on their enemies. Don't believe a word of it. They'll claim to have it all worked out, how this Bible verse lines up with this new conflict, and how the code is all coming clear, and God is pulling the strings and unleashing the plagues and wars, and they'll promise you God's protection if you'll just throw away your mask, pray this prayer, and send in your donation.

“Tragically, many ordinary faithful believers, God's beloved, will sit transfixed in front of their televisions, wondering whether perhaps these charlatans might be right. These false prophets sound so convincing; they've seen so many miracles and heard God speak right up close. They make ordinary faithful believers feel so small and inadequate, like spiritual failures. They leave them crying out for God to do something equally special for them. ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,’ they pray. ‘O that we would see your awesome deeds up close, see mountains quaking and your enemies trembling before you. But you have hidden yourself from us, God, and we don't measure up to these super-impressive prophets on the TV.’

“The truth is that this God who is hidden to them doesn’t exist. They don’t see God because they’ve been deceived into looking for the god of the TV prophets, a partisan god who endorses their crusades and pours wrath on their enemies, a god who waves a national flag and sends out the armies, a god who sends plagues if we don’t behave, and triggers earthquakes and floods and industrial accidents to flaunt his power. Such a god is a figment of their imagination, a projection of their own need to believe that everything is under control and that they’re numbered among the favoured ones. A curse on these charlatans who lead God’s children astray.

“But be alert; I have already told you everything you need to know. I have already told you where you will find the true God, the truly human God in whose image you were made. I have already told you that we are going into the city, right into the heart of the beast, and that the truly human one will be handed over to the religious and political leaders, to the charlatan prophets and the secret service, to the powers that demand allegiance from all. I have already told that he will be handed over to the angry powers, and will suffer and be paraded through the streets before a howling mob as the ultimate loser. I have already told you that in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the sky grow black, as you see the truly human one strung up on a post with nails driven through his flesh, dying alone and forsaken by all in the darkness.

“I have already told you that in that moment, in that very event, the ultimate power of God will be known, will be on display, for all who have eyes to see. In that moment, right there in the clouds of darkness, the clouds of hostility, the clouds of apparent defeat, they will see the unveiling of the truly human one, the true power and glory of God, the power to absorb hatred and embrace defeat without any need to reciprocate or avenge them, without any damage to the wellspring of love and forgiveness, forgiveness even for the torturers in the moment of agony.

“I have already told you that in that moment you will see and know God, and in that moment the angels will go out, and as I am lifted up I will draw all the world to me, from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven, and all will see and know that the worst that the world can do cannot defeat the true God’s limitless capacity to play no part in the worst the world can do. I have already told you that in that moment, the power of the worst the world can do will be broken, because it will come up against a power it cannot recognise, cannot begin to comprehend, a love and forgiveness that is oblivious to being shamed or despised or defeated or killed. A love and forgiveness that keep on rising again and loving and forgiving more and more and more.

“You know these things already. You know how to read the signs of summer in the budding of flowers and the lengthening days. Just apply the lesson. When you see these things, when you see the religious and political establishment savagely tearing down the truly human one, you will know that God is near, that God is right there in the midst of the suffering, weeping with all who suffer, but leading them out the other side in the joyous dance of life. It’s all taking place, right now, in this generation. This is not a fanciful prediction of some long off future. This is right now, right here.

“But today? Tomorrow? What time? Who knows? I don’t even know. It happens when it happens, over and over again. The charlatan prophets always claim to know, but they are

always wrong, and they wouldn't recognise it if they were right. They are still looking for some other kind of god who doesn't exist except in their fevered imaginations.

So beware. **Keep alert.** Stay awake with me, watch and pray. When people go on a journey, they ask others to keep an eye on their house for them, to stay alert and see that all is well. This is going to be one hell of a journey – hunted at birth and humiliated at death. I'd be more than happy if this cup would pass me by, but it won't be done with until I drink it to the dregs. So stay alert. Be on your guard when they try to turn the deepest truth into tinsel and trinkets, and to delude everyone into thinking that real power lies in the meaningless shock and awe of bombs and pandemics and campaign rallies. You know what is real. Stay awake with me. Watch and pray. That's what I ask of you this Advent. Stay awake. Watch and pray.