

## ***Bad News, Good News***

Mark 13:14-23

November 19, 2006

### **I.**

The Gospel is supposed to be the good news, isn't it? Everything we learn in Sunday School, in Christian education classes, and even in seminary teaches us that the Gospel of our Lord is the good news of salvation.

So where is the good news today? It sounded like a lot of bad news when I read it a few moments ago. Jesus spoke of a desolating sacrilege, and said that people would have to flee immediately. He said there would be tribulation greater than anyone had ever seen since the beginning of creation.

Then he said that if God had not intervened, no one would have even survived. And finally, as if all that wasn't enough, Jesus talked about false prophets and deceivers who would try to lead us astray.

How can any of that be good news? On the surface it is not. But when we look at it more closely we can see signs of hope. If we look past the words of desolation and disaster in the reading, and if we grasp the larger picture, we can detect a sense of anticipation, of optimism, just over the horizon.

And that is the purpose of today's Gospel. It is a story of the bad news that precedes the good. It is a message of faith in God's grace that always will be with us. But we have to go beyond today's reading to see that picture.

Sometimes that is not easy to believe. Sometimes we are so caught up in the problems of the present that we forget about the larger picture. Today's reading could apply to those situations. Today's reading, if that is all we read, focuses on Jesus' warnings without saying anything about the larger picture presented by Jesus' promises.

### **II.**

But to get into that larger picture we must look at more than just the text of today's reading. We also should examine the setting in which Jesus said what he did.

And doing that makes me wonder how some of our Gospel readings get selected. From time to time we can have a reading that just cries out to be put into context. Sometimes our readings simply cannot be fully understood based only on where they started or ended, and we need to know what happened just before or just after the part we actually heard.

That's the case today. In the part of Mark's Gospel just before the reading you heard, Jesus was describing a coming time of war and violence, a time when the Temple and other great buildings in Jerusalem would be destroyed. The disciples had marveled about the magnificence of the Temple, and Jesus told them that not one of its stones would be left on top of the other. It would be a time when nation would rise against nation, and there would be earthquakes and famines, and Christians would be persecuted and despised.

That time of conflict and struggle was the background for Jesus' warnings in the first part of today's Gospel to flee to the mountains and not even look back. And Jesus' words eventually came to pass. Within four decades after the crucifixion the Temple was destroyed in a four year siege by the Roman army. The people of Jerusalem were cut off, and it was a time of starvation and great desolation within the city. Only those who actually did flee to the mountains survived.

Then in the second part of today's reading Jesus spoke of a great tribulation where all of humanity would have been destroyed if the Lord had not shortened the days of trial. And he said false prophets would arise and perform miracles designed to lead believers astray. What are we supposed to think about that?

Well, the reading ends at that point and we are left in suspense. But if we had read just a little further in Mark's Gospel, we would have heard Jesus say that after the tribulation the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give light. We would have heard Jesus say that the Son of Man will appear in the clouds in great power and glory, and will send out his angels to gather believers from the ends of the earth, and then heaven and earth will pass away.

That probably sounds familiar. Now we start to get the picture. We all probably have heard apocalyptic language like that in a lot of end-time scenarios.

And so, by looking at the parts of Mark's Gospel that were not part of today's reading, we can understand that the part we did read described a time of war and destruction that was actually recorded in history, and then shifted to a future apocalyptic time when God's kingdom will be upon us. As a result, it is more clear that Jesus began today's reading by speaking of actual events in recorded history, and ended by speaking of cosmic events beyond history.

The reading started with the trials and troubles that preceded destruction of earthly Jewish Temple that stood in opposition to Jesus' teachings, and ended with the tribulations that will precede the arrival of heavenly things.

### III.

So, what does all this mean now? I began this sermon by wondering how the bad news we heard Jesus deliver today ever could be considered as good news. We now might have a better perspective on the answer. There is a purpose to today's Gospel that enables it to fit within the larger picture of God's kingdom. And there also is a meaning to today's Gospel as we await that glorious time.

Today's reading sets the stage for a message of faith, based in hope and perseverance. It is faith that out of trials, tribulations, and difficulties comes the sure and certain hope of God's peace, Christ's love, and our salvation. Sometimes this hope comes to pass in this world. Sometimes it awaits the next. But it always is there. Worldly things come and go. Heavenly things are for eternity

Earlier I mentioned how the disciples marveled at the magnificence of the Temple as they passed it by. I imagine that people might have expressed the same sentiments as they walked past World Trade Center prior to September 11. And while I do not draw any theological parallels between the two situations, the point is that all of our buildings will eventually pass away, but our faith will always sustain us.

In the same way Jesus warned people to flee to the high ground, to stay on their rooftops if they already were there, and to leave their homes and not turn back. I imagine that similar warnings were broadcast on the Mississippi coast fifteen months ago. And again, while I do not draw theological parallels between the two situations, I believe that many people turned to God in those dark days to find comfort and solace.

An old preacher once said that the hardest thing he had to do was to be with people as they were going through pain or tragedy, or as their hopes and dreams were falling apart, or as the world was crashing in upon them, and still be able to witness to the presence of God and God's love during those times.

The best he could do, he said, was to help them understand today's broken world in the same context as Jesus described the desolation and tribulation in today's Gospel. And then he would try to hold out hope for them in the future, and gave an example of one way he did that.

He told a story about a worship service he was conducting in a hospital that specialized in treating cancer patients. During the service he took a \$20 bill out of his pocket, and asked the patients who wanted it. Just about everybody's hand shot up. Then he took the bill and crumpled it up in his hand, and then asked who wanted it. The same hands went up. Then he took the bill, put it on the floor, stepped on it and ground his heel into it. He picked it up, asked now who wanted it, and still everybody's hand went up.

"This is an important lesson," the old preacher said. "No matter what happened to this bill, it's still worth \$20. It didn't lose any of its value." Then he said, "The same applies to you. No matter how much you have been crumpled up, stepped on, or ground into the floor, you have not lost any of your value. You are worth exactly as much to God today as you were the day you were born."

That applies to all of us. We all are of infinite value to God, and we all face the trials and tribulations of this world. And if we believe that God is with us as we struggle through them, then our faith is real even though we can fall into doubts.

#### IV.

Some people, especially historians, say that we are shaped by what we have experienced in the past. I have another theory. I say that as Christians we are shaped to a greater extent by what we believe about the future. We are sustained more by faith than by memories. And if we have faith, if we believe that God is with us, then even if we flee to the mountains he will be with us, and even if we are stuck on our rooftops he will be with us.

Faith obviously is not an insurance policy against difficulties, and belief in the Gospel promise does not turn away all problems. And even becoming a Christian does not automatically resolve all of the hardships of life. But we experience victory and we can persevere not because of the absence of problems, but because of the presence of faith.

As we close out this season of Pentecost this week and next, and as we prepare for the wonderful time of Advent, I pray that we can see beyond the temporary trials and tribulations of our lives, and look to the permanent things that are part of God's promises to us. *Amen.*