

Sermon: Not the End

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Daniel 12:1-3; Mark 13:1-8**

Today's Scripture passages are both apocalyptic in nature but at the same time, completely different in their point of view. By apocalyptic, I mean pretty much what that word sounds like. Apocalyptic writings predict all sorts of mayhem, false prophets and messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famine, political unrest, you name it, it all happens in advance of the coming of the true Messiah. These calamities all must come before the advent of the Second Coming. It's gotta get bad before it can get good.

The Book of Daniel is a conglomeration of folk tales and apocalyptic writings. In the passage we heard today, we see the first clear reference in the Hebrew Bible to resurrection, final judgement, and the afterlife. It's tricky stuff. Many, but not all, will awake, both good and bad people, but not necessarily in a bodily form. The wise 'shall shine like the brightness of the sky,' and the ones who lead many, but not all, to righteousness, will shine like the stars at night.

Daniel is talking about the end times. 'At that time,' Michael, whose name is a question meaning, 'Who Is Like God?' shall arise following a time of anguish. Now, angels have been involved in the story throughout. Gabriel makes an appearance in chapter eight to help Daniel interpret a vision, for example. Michael has been in battle in Persia and in Greece but here announces the victory at the end of days.

In the second century before Jesus, or about 230 years before Mark wrote his Gospel, the Jewish people had experienced oppression under a bad king, endured a civil war, then persecution, all following centuries of foreign domination. Things were grim. But Daniel tells the people that God is in charge, not oppressive kings like Antiochus, who thought that he himself was a god. In fact, in the last verse in chapter 11 immediately before today's passage, we are told that Antiochus 'shall come to his end, with no one to help him' (Daniel 11:45).

Jesus takes it in the opposite direction. This is not the end, he says; it's just the beginning of the end.

Mark tells us that when they came out of the Temple, the disciples acted a little like tourists, marveling at how awesome the stones and buildings were. Jesus says, yeah, but it's all coming down soon. No mention of rebuilding it, either, as in Matthew.

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, he tells them, that's a sign but don't worry. Echoing Isaiah, Jesus tells them that nations will rise against nations and so on, but it's all part of God's plan. For the righteous and faithful, there is nothing to fear. But Jesus doesn't give them a timetable. He tells them the signs but also says that the end is still to come. He downplays the end in order to keep us focused on the now.

A lot of people these days might argue with Jesus that there is plenty to be alarmed about. We have serious problems in this country which seem to defy resolution: hunger, poverty, homelessness, and rising anti-Semitism, to name a few. The world in general is no better; it seems to be perpetually at war. Even Creation seems angry, with fire and flood at the top of the headlines.

We're living in between Jesus' resurrection and his Second Coming. Every bad thing that happens is part of the present age. The tragedies that play out on the nightly news are not signs of the end times. It's just bad news. But it's not the end.

'Happy are those who persevere,' reads Daniel in the next to last verse in the book, but it's hard when you're hungry, persecuted, or freezing in your own home.

Daniel's vision anticipates that the present suffering of both the living and the righteous dead would be transformed through God's faithfulness at that time when Michael appears. At that time, at the end. Then, there will be justice. In the meantime, the faithful and wise must endure in the present age.

In Daniel, Michael is God's agent for the raising of the dead to heaven. God's deliverance is not just from oppression and persecution but from death itself. The fact that resurrection involves *many* of the good and the bad – but not all – tells us something. If we read more of Daniel, we get the idea that those resurrected ones are the martyrs and their oppressors. The martyrs are raised up and the persecutors judged. 'Vengeance is mine,' says the Lord, 'and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly' (Deuteronomy 32:35).

In Mark, the implication is that, with the end being out there in the future somewhere, we still need to spread the good news, care for our neighbors, the widows, and orphans, and worship God as righteous and faithful people. All these disruptive things will happen, Jesus says, but until then, do your job. God will take care of the rest.

So where is the good news in all of this?

Our biggest challenge, says Mark, is to keep awake, to persevere, to hang on, until the coming of the Son of Man.

By not knowing exactly when to expect the Second Coming, but in our hope for a future resurrection, we are expected to do the work Jesus set out for us right here and now. Daniel makes it clear that resurrection is not a do-over; we are not going to just pick up where we left off. Instead, we can expect to get promoted to a heavenly existence that is nothing like this one. Any story that includes angels, supernatural deliverance, and everlasting life can't possibly mean that we get to go back to our daily commute and winter weather. It has to mean something more.

Jesus sets out for us a way to live that does not include focusing on the problems of the day or on the Second Coming. If we want to interpret every tragic event as being part of God's plan, we are free to Google it but not to let it interfere with God's purpose for us. It is better, Jesus teaches, that we focus on our mission to be witnesses to the good news, to spread the gospel, and to live it.

Amen.