

Sermon: A Rhetorical Question

New North Church, Hingham

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

When you hear the word *apocalypse*, what comes to mind?

Apocalypse is the English version of the Greek word *apokálypsis* (ἀποκάλυψις), which means to uncover or remove the cover of something in order to make it visible. In other words, to reveal it. That is why the last book in the New Testament is known as the Book of Revelation. It is literally the Book of the Apocalypse.¹

From a Christian perspective, *the* apocalypse refers to the ultimate destruction of evil and the triumph of good at the end of the age.

An apocalypse can also be defined as a form of literature ‘in which a revelation of transcendent reality is given by an angel’ or other heavenly bring to a human.² Such a revelation is understood to have come from God. Apocalyptic literature is symbolic and meant to be interpreted as an allegory. It separates this world from the world to come; earth from heaven; light from dark.

In apocalyptic writing, God will ultimately set things right; good will triumph over evil. Apocalyptic thought focuses on God’s judgement and justice, and it always offers a word of hope.

An apocalyptic worldview is attractive to those who are trapped in their own emotional, physical, or spiritual crisis because it offers a way in which things make sense and everyone has a place.³

The Book of Daniel is almost entirely an apocalypse, which reflects the times in which it was written, a time of persecution for Jews. Mark 13 is sometimes called ‘the little apocalypse’ because that’s all Jesus talks about until the story takes its inevitable turn in chapter 14. It’s no coincidence that both readings are set in troubled times.

We also live in a troubled world, and we wouldn’t be far off in saying that perhaps it has always been troubled. Very rarely in recorded history has humankind lived in perfect peace everywhere on the planet at the same time.

If we look out the window, everything looks peaceful and as it should be, but not even the peace on our streets and in our public spaces can hide the unsettling reality that we have problems all over the place and they are often just out of view.

In every era before mass communication came along, local disturbances could make it seem like the end times were here. But a local disturbance is just that.

In the grand scheme of things, the American Revolution was a skirmish as far as the English Empire was concerned. France got involved, but that was politics. Our Civil War, on the other hand, set off a theological debate that carried into Europe, but neither of these conflicts was thought to be a sign of the apocalypse.

Now, the First World War, also known as the Great War or the War to End all Wars, was a global conflict of unprecedented destruction and carnage, with most of it occurring in Europe. The first Battle of the Somme became a metaphor for futile and indiscriminate slaughter.⁴ The war itself and subsequent genocides combined with the related 1918 Spanish flu pandemic caused many millions of deaths worldwide. Even though it wasn't the apocalypse, it must have felt like it for those stuck in the middle of it.

Fast forward to Germany in the 1930s and Kristallnacht and the Holocaust; for Europe's Jews, this *was* an apocalypse, but not *the* apocalypse. God did ultimately set things right and good did triumph over evil, and the world vowed to never forget it.

Now we have Covid-19 and a global pandemic. Things looked grim a year ago, but we are a resourceful species. Vaccines are now available, we've learned new ways to be together even while we continue to stand a little further away from each other, and we have great hopes that this too will pass.

Still, people want to know, Are *these* the end times? No; it's [Friday].

In the Book of Daniel, Apocalypse Now will arrive when Michael, the great prince, the *protector* of the people, arrives. The time of anguish sounds scary; it promises to be something that has never occurred since nations first came into existence.

It'll be big.

But at the same time, the people shall be *delivered* – by Michael, or Christ, in Christian interpretation. This passage is about the resurrection of the dead, hopefully to everlasting life. The focus here is on the community being together again. It's all good.

Even Mark makes it sound scary, especially if you read the entire chapter at once.

Chapter 13 is a transition, where Jesus comes out of the Temple for the last time, his teaching and ministry done. People were out to get him. In this moment of rest, Jesus tells his disciples exactly what to expect.

Today's passage also gives us a clue of when Mark wrote his Gospel, as we mentioned last week. Here, Jesus says the Temple stones will all be thrown down, which is what happened when the Babylonians came through five hundred years earlier: they looted the city, burned it, and leveled it. The Romans did the same thing in Mark's time.

To the Jews in Jerusalem, this might very well have seemed like the end times.

Peter, James, and John, that trio who seem to be involved in every important event with Jesus, plus Andrew, asked Jesus privately, "What will be *the* sign that all these things *are about to be* accomplished?" In typical fashion, Jesus treats this as a rhetorical question and answers a different, unasked, question.

Beware, he said. There will be false prophets but don't listen to them. There will be war and rumors of war. Nation will rise up against nation. There will be famines. But – in the middle of all this calamitous and disturbing imagery – Jesus softens the message by saying, "Do not be alarmed."

In chapter 13 alone, Jesus says things like "Beware! Keep awake! Watch, and See!" eleven times. He's not saying we should watch for signs but to continue to be faithful in our work, and to keep awake. It will be as if Jesus is almost here but not yet.

So, what will be the sign? Jesus returning at the end times is the sign, and if you missed it the first time, you don't want to miss it again. Keep awake!

And in the meantime, don't worry – all of this is not the end; it's just the beginning of the beginning.

If we look at chapter 13 as a whole, we can see that Mark has put us somewhere between the resurrection and Jesus' second coming, the *Parousia*. He lets us know that terrible events will happen at every level; whether it's in our families, city, or nation, bad stuff will happen but it's just part of the age we live in and none of it means it's the end.

In the light of all that can happen to us on any given day, how do we profess our faith in God's coming reign of justice and peace even as we go about our business? What words and actions would be most appropriate? Or should we rely on good, clean living to get us through? Keep our heads down and hope for the best?

Scripture often sounds like so much doom and gloom, but there is always a glimmer of future hope embedded in apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic writings are filled with vividly scary images, but the message is about hope and unity. The Book of Revelation with all its beasts and the horsemen is fertile ground for those who like to write Gothic horror novels, but who is it that ends up in a lake of fire for a thousand years? Not any of us. No, it's *Diabolos*, the old deceiver.⁵

There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and God will dwell with mortals.⁶
No wonder Jesus wasn't worried.

Amen.

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¹ <https://www.quora.com/What-does-the-Greek-word-apocalypse-mean>, accessed 11 November 2021.

² Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 27.

³ Gregory Stevenson, "Preaching Apocalyptically," *Restoration Quarterly* 42 (2000): 233.

⁴ On the first day of the battle, 20,000 British soldiers died. <https://www.britannica.com/event/First-Battle-of-the-Somme>, accessed 13 November 2021.

⁵ Revelation 20:10.

⁶ Revelation 21:3.