

Ready for Dreadful Days

Mark 13:14-23

Last sermon, I used mountains as an analogy. God's prophecies can shed light on events in the near and distant future. Like viewing a mountain range from a distance...you can't tell how wide the valley is in between. Or climbing to a peak...you get to the top and find out it's only the shoulder. God the Father knows the peak...He made that peak. Darlene and I decided to climb Bear Mountain in Red Rock State Park (Sedona, Arizona). At the trailhead, we read a sign warning us about water needs and the time the hike would take. I thought they were overstating it for more casual hikers. We met a young couple within minutes of our journey who said they'd done it in way less time. But I was forgetting some things:

1. I'm not a young person.
2. I'm not in the shape I used to be
3. We were beginning after noon.

We got to the top of what I could see from where we had parked. And what did I find? It was just a shoulder. And what did I find after climbing the next peak? It was just another shoulder. About that time, a young guy coming down told us "The last peak is just another 10 minutes." I was thinking, "whatever". I plodded along breathing heavily in 'survival mode'. I was pushing myself with the thought,

"you'll kick yourself later if you quit now and it would rob Darlene too". And then I saw that beautiful sight...that made it all worth the effort: a wooden sign on a post 'end of trail'. (The view was ok too) That sign back at the trailhead was for me. And this section of warnings in Mark is for us too. We are prone to the same spiritual dangers that Jesus is warning the disciples about. At the time Mark wrote, the believers were enduring a terrible time...during the reigns of Caligula and Nero. Those believers had great reason to believe the Antichrist of the end had risen. This chapter reminds us that we are followers. God's subjects. God is in charge. And we need to trust Him along His more narrow and difficult way. That reminds me...Darlene and I would never have reached our goal in a day, if some caring person had not painted trail markers on the stone. At the very first choice where there was no marker...I chose the wrong way and it led to a pointy plant that drew blood from my leg. The first direction Jesus gives is about guarding our hearts (staying close to God) so we aren't deceived. (13:5)

We know these are the last days - between the resurrection and return of Christ. We know Who began time

and Who will end it. This is far more assurance than the rest of the world. Yet our mission as God's representatives to carry forward the Gospel (1 Pet 2:9, 2 Cor 5:11-21) brings challenges. We look for assurances...signs and experiences that urge us on. And perhaps signs that we don't have much further to go. If we're honest, who wouldn't want to be caught up to our Lord: spared from persecution and death like Enoch and Elijah. Yet so many of our brothers and sisters in other times and places have suffered and died because of Jesus.

Suffering is a fact of life. Even the rich and famous suffer their guilt, sickness, loss, fear, doubt and rejection. And many more experience hunger, thirst, heat and cold. And so we ask for God's help with the suffering of this life. But what of the suffering the disciples are being warned about on the way to the cross? The suffering they will face when their own people and the authorities want them locked up or killed. Jesus said, "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...*" (Matt 5:11-12a) I think they experience a deeper joy. They rejoiced in prison because they were

considered worthy of suffering for JESUS (Acts 5:41).

How will we do in persecution or when the dreadful days near the end are rising?

We must be prepared. And that is why we study Scriptures like Mark 13.

PRAY

Summary of 13:5-13

We're in the middle of what is called the Olivet discourse...just after Jesus' last time in the temple, defending his authority and teaching the crowds. His closest disciples have asked Him when the Temple will be destroyed AND what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled. 'All' includes Jesus' return to set up God's kingdom on earth (Christ's return Matt 24:3).

Jesus responds immediately with a warning. Guard your heart. 'Heart' reminds me of David, a man after God's own heart and how he strived to be close to God. I also see a connection with Jesus' recent teaching about faith in God (Mk 11:22). His first concern is for their soul.

What's the urgency?

There will be great deceivers who play on the fears of dangerous times. How do we handle danger and fear? Meet fear with the sword of the Spirit...the word of God. There we find God does not give us a spirit of fear but power, love and a sound mind (2 Tim 1:7). We need not fear evil for the Lord,

our Shepherd, leads us (Psalm 23:4-5). Trust in God as our shield from terror (Ps 56, 91:1-6). We can trust God because He loves us as His adopted children (adopted, Rom 8:15). So who can be against us? Nothing can separate us for the love of God, in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:29-39).

These threats, wars and calamities must happen but contrary to the false saviors – it is not the end! These are only birth pangs of the end.

Why does Jesus talk of delay? Israel's side of the covenant with God is beyond repair. Why not just end this folly of humanity and set things right? Because of God's love (Jn 3:16). When God sent Jesus, He was making a new covenant...written in the blood of His Son and sealed by the Holy Spirit. And His law will be written, not on stone but repentant, believing hearts. God has a plan. Trust Him.

The disciples (who become the apostles), will face questioning, punishment and death because of Jesus. But the Gospel will go out everywhere...even to the highest human authorities. The name of Jesus will go everywhere because before end, the Gospel must first be preached to all nations. That's the delay, God's love.

Jesus is preparing His disciples and us for a great mission.

We are warned to guard our hearts...depend on God in dreadful

days. Those first believers depended on the Holy Spirit for every word when they stood on trial. And today, God helps us by the same Holy Spirit, Who brings to mind the word we have hidden in our heart. Even persecution from our own family, like the first Christians had to endure. Trials grow us (James 1) and bring opportunity (Eph 5:15) for the lost to find the Good Shepherd.

We left off in V13, with Jesus' 2-part promise:

- (1) *Everyone will hate you because of me.* Look at what they did to Jesus.
- (2) *"but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."*

Were Jesus' disciples faithful?

Eventually, yes...except for Judas. Did they escape prison, torture and death? No. Saved means our names written in the book of life - entering God's kingdom forever. And this is by faith in Christ – His sacrifice because of our sin and His resurrection and ascension to rule in heaven where He prepares a place for all the believers. Jesus called this amazing realization, repentance and new life...being 'born again' – born of the Spirit (Jn 3-8). And that, I am pleased to report is still going on in our little town of Lillooet. Amen? **(Assurance for the believer handout available)**

Jesus moves forward now, with a very specific sign and urgent instructions.

V14 Abomination and Desolation

Abomination that causes desolation is an object, event (perhaps a person) that defiles a holy place and causes it to be abandoned and left desolate. Or that which God detests and which causes something to be left desolate (Lexicon, Louw). In the OT, an abomination could include defective sacrifices (Duet 17:1), sorcery/witchcraft (Dt 18:12), and worshiping idols (2 kgs 16:3) and great violence (Eze 8:17) provoking the Lord to wrath and judgement.

This phrase comes from the Hebrew. And in Matthew's account, we find that Jesus is drawing from Daniel. A reminder to us that God is consistent. He revealed to Daniel prophesies about the return of Israel from exile to rebuild, the Messiah, tribulation, His return and even beyond... a time when there will no longer be vision and prophesy because God will be dwelling with His people in the most Holy City (9:24-27). I enjoyed reading more about that city in Ezekial 40-48. This phrase alluding to Daniel would be like an 'aha' moment for the disciples. This is what God has been predicting all along...when the temple will be defiled and the sacrifices will cease (Dan 9:26-27).

There had already been an attempt to wipe out the faith of the Jews during the rule of Antiochus. At one point, he

set up an alter to Zeus over the alter of burnt offerings. He also sacrificed a pig on the alter. Many see this as the abomination that causes desolation. That must have been devastating but the Maccabees came to the rescue...and God allowed stability for a time and the temple practises resumed. Herod was in the middle of building the most glorious temple ever. So I have trouble seeing this match up with the timing of Jesus' words. The idolatrous Romans and their assault on the Temple plus the activities of the zealots in the temple during the siege line up better as the abomination from my point of view. The desolation of temple and the sacrifice system continues to this day. The abomination back in Daniel includes an arch enemy of God wreaking devastation on God's people and ending the temple sacrifices (Dan 9-12). Now when we consider Paul's teaching about the man of lawlessness in 2 Thess 2:3-4 (who must come before the return of Christ) it's not hard to see this abomination will be played out again...but with a more far-reaching impact this time. With the whole world watching.

Let the reader understand This is the narrator, Mark breaking in to urge the reader to understand how this confirms prophesy in Daniel. It also

heightens the urgency...the destruction of Jerusalem hadn't happened yet.

So how are the disciples to respond when the abomination is happening? There seems to be a break from Jesus' regular instructions for this event. In verse 7, Jesus says don't be alarmed by calamities (don't be deceived by those claiming to be God's savior). Yet here Jesus says if you're still in Judea – flee to the mountains.

V15-18 Refuge

Your life is more important than anything. They would have to trust God can provide those necessities. The city will not be safe. In the winter, the creek beds would be full making travel difficult, especially for pregnant women. We know bad winter travel can be. Jesus is helping them see the time for the Temple system has past. And He warns them to remove themselves from defending it. Don't look upon those buildings with awe anymore. Jesus is drawing a line in the sand. Do not put yourself in harms way. God is fulfilling His judgement on Israel and their religion. He has different plans for you...to carry out a worldwide community of God: The body of Christ. God does not dwell in a temple made with human hands, but in human hearts by faith.

Today, we must also discern the times and what is valuable to God. We are

not to live frightful, and easily alarmed. God is our refuge. The Holy Spirit and God's word will continue to guide us when to stay and when to seek refuge to live another day...as His ambassadors.

V19-20 How bad can it get?

This reference to the great tribulation is patterned after Dan 12:1, in which Michael the archangel warns God's people what will happen at the end: *"A time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then."*

Most of us have a familiarity with the horror of war...from the comfort of our homes or theatres. But we have no idea what it would be to survive a holocaust. To experience the stench and fear of death. To see loved ones bodies' - skin and bone waiting to die of starvation. To feel survivor's guilt...from cannibalism. Historians of the day record 1.1 million dead from starvation, plague and slaughter. Walkways filled with the dead. I don't think we can imagine the smells, sights, loss and guilt. 97,000 taken captive as a trophy for who knows what. Jesus does not want them in the middle of that. He pleads with them to stay far away from being deceived or conscripted into this madness. It's horrible, what humans can do to each other.

Even at it's worse, this world is not outside the control of God, who can shorten the days of evil (see 2 Sam. 24:16; Isa. 45:8). There are several times in scripture and in history since, that if God had not protected a remnant, there would be none of His left. None to pass on the Gospel. Even in the last 500 years there was a time when it seemed all the born-again believers would be wiped out. A revival sparked by brave servants of God and aided by the invention of the printing press broke out in Europe. But the corrupted power institution - the state church, saw this as treason and nearly wiped them out. The Holy Spirit protects God's word and preserves a remnant. And we sit today in a building with Bibles in our own language...even under our chairs. The NT writers warn that the spirit of the antichrist is influencing people and will gather for a final assault on God's people for control of the world. I was reading Revelation 13...about Satan's assault on God's people through the 'beast'; slander against God, world-wide power to force all to worship him and sanctioned execution of believers. And I came to verse 10: *If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, they will be killed.* Then I read, *This calls for patient endurance*

and faithfulness on the part of God's people.

That really spoke to me. How will believers endure near the end?

Read Rev 7: 9, 13-17.

V21 Falsehood Rises

This is when the end is near and the man of lawlessness is rising to power (2 Thess 2). What is going to get us through persecution? This is how Paul handles it for the believers in Thessalonica:

Read 2 Thess 1: 6-12

God is Just...everyone will receive what's coming to them in the end
Keep glorifying Christ...that's how to pray for each other

We will study more about Christ's return next week.

V23 Be on Guard

Christ told the disciples things ahead of time to increase their faith and to warn them. What does it mean...to be on guard?

I hope that is easier to answer as we've been studying this chapter. No matter what others may think or do, obey God...eyes wide open. And how will be obey God if we have neglected knowing Him?

Many believers not staying on guard are fooled by those with an air of authority, who claim to have the inside knowledge from God. Others have convinced themselves they can hasten the Day of the Lord with their

frantic efforts to preach the gospel overseas. It is hard to undo the damage done by immature 'missionaries' (unprepared for cross-cultural work and steeped in a Gospel saturated with their own cultural baggage).

Let us therefore be concerned for what Jesus wants from His disciples. Jesus is most concerned about how His disciples will do under pressure. Will they succumb and renounce Christ to save their earthly lives? We need not be frantic and guilt ridden servants of God. God's plan is for the Gospel to reach everywhere...even through the calamities and threats of the times. He will continue. If we refuse to make the most of the opportunities He presents to us along our way (Eph 5:15)...we can repent and get back into fellowship and on track (Rev 3:19-22)...rather than wallow in our failure.

In dreadful times we must not allow the yearning for deliverance to fool us into embracing man-made solutions and fantasies that God won't allow His children to suffer or that we deserve worldly peace and prosperity. And what is our mindset to be? *patient endurance and faithfulness.*

If you have been delaying getting right with God through Jesus...now it the time. And I would be happy to help. There is also a pamphlet at the back,

'Assurance for the Believer' you can take along with my card.

What gives me determination to study uncomfortable and mysterious passages is the desire to know my Lord better and know His concern for us on dreadful days.