

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 15, 2009
Pentecost 24
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Daniel 12:1-13
Psalm 16:5-11
Hebrews 10:31-39
Mark 13:14-23

In the case of both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons this morning, Daniel and the disciples both find themselves with minds full of questions. Although the *National Enquirer* had yet to come along, people are people, and inquiring minds always want to know.

In the case of Daniel and the disciples, what they seek to know is the future, and what signs or events might alert them to the fact that the end of all things was at hand.

The book of Daniel, and this portion of Mark's Gospel, is a type of literature known as *apocalyptic* literature. It gets its name from the Revelation to St. John, where the original Greek term is *apocalypsis*. The term means "unveiling," or "revelation."

Apocalyptic literature arose in situations of great crisis, moments of great economic and political persecution. Groups or communities who were the subject of that oppression and persecution found their identities and their very existence at stake. Things were so bad and circumstances so dire that it was believed that the only answer or solution to such events was a dramatic, cataclysmic intervention by

God. It's no wonder, then, that the theme behind apocalyptic literature can be found in the short prayer that concludes the book of Revelation, where you find these words: "Even so, come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

Another feature of apocalyptic literature is its use of vivid images and bizarre symbols, all of which might tempt readers or hearers to see in these images some sort of "blueprint" to the future. This is where Daniel and the disciples both find themselves. They want a "sign," some sort of roadmap that alerts them to the end and how things will all play out.

In Daniel's case, he says, "How will all this finally end, my Lord?"

In the case of the disciples, their question is just prior to our Gospel text this morning, where they ask: "tell us, Lord, when will all this happen, and what will be the sign of its coming?" (Mk. 13:4)

Yes, the centuries come and go, but people do not change. Inquiring minds want to know.

And such is the case with us, isn't it? We also want the blueprints to the future. We want to know the timelines, and events, the places. We want to know the signs of Jesus' return, and how everything related to the end of the world is going to unfold and play out.

And one of the first places we often look in the Scriptures for answers to our questions is to these apocalyptic passages. We assume that they were written to

give us the “inside track,” to provide us detailed clues as to how the future will unfold and how the end of the world will take place.

But alas, such is not the purpose of apocalyptic literature. The purpose of apocalyptic literature is not to provide us blueprints to the future, but to remind God’s people that no matter how dire circumstances may get, God is still in control. These passages were not written to give us a road map to the end times, but to strengthen and encourage us in those times when we are gripped by the jaws of defeat (and even death). In those times when it appears as though all may be lost, apocalyptic literature reminds us that in Jesus Christ WE WIN!

Return with me to the passage from Daniel. Daniel hears and sees everything that’s been revealed to him, but he has no clue what it all means. He says, “I heard what he [the angelic messenger] said, but I did not understand what he meant. So I asked, “how will all this finally end, my lord?”

But he said, “Go now, Daniel, for what I have said is for the time of the end.”

Just a few verses later Daniel is told again, “as for you, go your way until the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days, you will rise again to receive the inheritance set aside for you.”

This is instructive for us, I believe. Daniel asks for clarification here, but he is told, “go your way.” In other words, live your life. Be about your business. Go

about your days, one day at a time, being faithful to God. The end will finally come, and when it does, you'll rise again, and you will win.

And let's look again at Jesus' words to the disciples in Mark 13. The words in our text are actually more a reference to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 than they are to the end of the world. They refer more to the sacking of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman armies than they do to the end of the world. But even if we grant that the words can have a double significance or reference, look at what Jesus tells the disciples at the end of the passage. He essentially tells them, "don't be caught off guard or distracted when people come claiming to have the blueprint or the roadmap."

You see, any time we have a conversation about the end times or the return of Christ, two extremes are possible.

First, we can live with a sort of "hyperexpectancy" about Jesus' coming. This leads to an unhealthy obsession about all of the details, and causes us to construct our timelines and our charts and graphs, and ultimately to print our books (especially when we see how profitable doing so becomes).

The second extreme is *complacency* with regard to Jesus' coming. The more time that elapses, the easier it is to get complacent, to even doubt that Jesus will return again.

When I was a new Christian, my high school Journalism teacher chided me one day when I mentioned something about the fact that Jesus was going to come again.

She got very agitated and said, “you Christians have been hollering for centuries that Jesus is coming again, but I haven’t seen anything of him yet.”

The purpose of apocalyptic literature is not to provide us the blueprints and the timelines. The purpose of apocalyptic writing is to keep us between the two extremes of *obsession* and *complacency*, and to exhort us not to become distracted. The purpose of apocalyptic writing is to remind us that *we win*, even if we lose our lives while we’re in the game and on the field of battle.

This is precisely what the writer tells his audience in Hebrews 10. He says, “do not throw away your confidence in the Lord, no matter what happens. Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God’s will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.”

This sounds very similar to the advice Daniel was given, does it not? Go your way, Daniel. Stay strong. Stay true. Stay faithful. Persevere. Keep on keeping on. Don’t obsess about the “end,” but don’t get complacent, either. Just stay in the game and keep playing.

I ask you to bow your heads and close your eyes for a moment.

In the quietness of this moment, I want you to think of all the challenges that confront you in your life right now. Things that burden your heart, things that are a source of suffering in your life. In the silence of this moment, listen for these words:

Do not throw away your confident trust in the Lord, no matter what happens. Remember the great reward it brings you. Patient endurance is what you need now, so you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.

As you come to the Table this morning, the bread and wine is a down payment to you of God's promise. It is a good faith deposit that the full promise is on its way. Take it gratefully, and press ahead by faith.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.