

NARRATOR: While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, “The Lord said to my Lord, . . .

In the original Hebrew, written 1,000 years before Jesus, the two words for "lord" are different. The first refers to God. The second to an earthly king. So it actually says,

NARRATOR: "God said to my king, . . .

Of course, by Jesus's day, with the Jewish monarchy having been destroyed for centuries, this understanding of this phrase had evolved. The earthly lord then referred to the hoped for messiah.

NARRATOR: "God said to my messiah, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’ ” David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son?’ And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.

The verbal attack and riposte that the religious authorities had begun Tuesday morning is now continued in the afternoon, but with Jesus taking the offensive and continuing his confrontation of them. In Mark's presentation of the Gospel, this story serves three points. First, Jesus is beating them at their own game; second, Jesus (and Mark) keep the issue of the messiah forefront; third, Mark continues to emphasize strongly that the Jews—the people—loved Jesus and his message. The Jews DID NOT reject him. Only those who answered to Rome, and who had everything to lose, rejected him.

NARRATOR: As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

UPDATE: Wow. What a Tuesday it has been at the temple. Jesus and the religious authorities have been confronting each other all day. Say what you will about this Jesus, this last hour at the temple where he sat and commented on the pilgrims' actions simply shows the consistency of his message: he claims the religious authorities have lost their way and no longer represent the way of God. The poor widow dressed in rags who gives two coppers to the treasury contributes more than the donated gold of the well-heeled authorities. Jesus is leaving the temple now. Let's see if we can follow him for just a bit.

NARRATOR: As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

UPDATE: Well, listeners, perhaps Jesus doesn't understand. Josephus reports that some of these stones are 68 feet long, 9 feet high and 8 feet wide. Only an army the size of Rome's could possibly tear that down. And they are here to protect it. One has to wonder what Jesus is talking about. And now we can see Jesus leaving the area. He looks to be headed to the Mount of Olives with four of his disciples. What a view of the city and the temple he will have from there.

NARRATOR: When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

The narration that is commencing here is known as the Little Apocalypse; the big apocalypse is of course the book of Revelation, for that is what the world apocalypse means: 'revelation' or 'unveiling.'

Twentieth and twenty first century mainline preachers have not known what to do with apocalyptic text. I remember as an adolescent seeing a cartoon of what was clearly some religious nut. This was in the mid-60's when the Beatles were just hitting the scene with the song, She Loves You. The cartoon character was standing on a busy street corner holding a sign that said, "The world is coming to an end! yeah, yeah, yeah." He was explaining to a perplexed passerby that he was trying to appeal to the younger generation. In many regards this cartoon captures mainline Protestants' distaste and distrust of such passages. EVERY generation, from Jesus' time until now has its cadre of extremists who proclaim the end of the world. The series of books known as "Left Behind" is this generation's iteration. In preparation for this sermon I began reading book one of that series. I made it through roughly 10 pages and had to put it down because I was so disgusted with the hateful, biblically inaccurate and self-righteous shallow theology that was there.

Despite my distrust and distaste, however, the passages ARE there and as someone ordained to preach the whole Word, not just the parts I happen to like, I must address such passages and not run from or cheapen them. As a colleague from my seminary put it, "I do not know what to do with a text like this one. I dare not explain, adjust, or apply it. Perhaps I should not do anything to it, rather allow the text to do something to us. To stand before such a text, one so rich with unmanageable images, signs of sun, moon, and stars, distress of nations, fear and foreboding, causes a preacher's knees to tremble. I shall let it stand. I shall allow its white hot searing blast to singe your eyebrows. Anything less would be an affront to the text. This is not a text to be abused in a

*sermonette, by a precherette, for Christianettes."*¹ Thus, as we listen to the continuing narrative as Jesus is speaking privately to only four of his disciples, remember that Jesus described his images as, "the beginning of the birth pangs." Something is being born. Something new is happening.

NARRATOR: 'As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Do you notice here that the Christian community does NOT participate in the violence? They are the ones being beaten, they do not do the beating. They are ones being betrayed, they do not do the betraying. They are the ones proclaiming hope and love, and are hated because of it.

The early Christian community was anti-imperial AND non-violent. Mark was writing to them during the greatest Jewish revolt which began in the year 66 CE, roughly 33 years after Jesus's death. The temple was now torn down; those great stones were no longer standing one upon another. Neighbors and family members were betraying each other the authorities, Jews were being persecuted so intensely that some scholars postulate that their slaughter was as great a percentage of the overall population as during the Nazi extermination of our own era.² These people were seeing the destruction of the world even as Rome thought it was merely strengthening the empire. What made the Christian community so vulnerable was that they were anti-imperial, so Rome sought them out to kill them; and they did not violently oppose Rome so the extremist rebel groups sought them out to kill them.

NARRATOR: 'But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. And if anyone says to you at that time, "Look! Here is the Messiah!" or "Look! There he is!"—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything.

'But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,

¹ Willamon, William; *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1994, page 36.

² Borg, Marcus and Crossan, Dominique; *The Last Week*; Harper; San Francisco; 2006, page 80.

and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

If Jesus were to preach apocalyptic images in a mainline church in the 21st century it would be because he was really trying to get our attention, shake things up and tell us to 'LISTEN!' He would turn over pews and tear doors off hinges, . . . sort of like when we hire in trumpets and tympani and make a lot of noise.

No, we don't hear such preaching in our churches. We ministers wimp out because we know how angry or congregations will be at us. As Methodist bishop and former chaplain at Duke University William Willimon notes, "Mainline Protestantism lacks the language of shaking heavens, sea, and waves. We have traded apocalyptic poetry for therapeutic advice. Thus, we are unable to speak either to great pain or large fear. The line between Sunday sermons and Dear Abby grows thin. Alas," he goes on to write, "the lessening of apocalyptic is always a signal for the adjustment of the church to the needs of the petty bourgeois and its anxieties. Today one can learn more about the justice of the oppressed, the deep pain of the poor or average middle-class miseries by going to the theater than by listening to a sermon. Art and apocalyptic go together. We now refer to our pastors as 'members of the helping professions.' 'Where does it itch, dear? Oh please, let the church scratch it.'"³

NARRATOR: Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

Monica Helwig once said, "If it won't play in a cancer ward or a shoddy nursing home for the elderly, then whatever it is, it is not the gospel."

If it won't play for the family who lived a middle-class life for 40 years and today find themselves homeless in a tanking global economy, if it won't play for a women being stalked by her ex-husband and who, along with her children, is murdered by his unhinged rage, if it won't play for a Jewish or Palestinian family who sees a bomb or rocket take

³ *ibid*; Willimon; page 36.

out their neighbors, if it won't play for my dear friend Kathy's parents who received a phone call from the police that their daughter and my friend had just been raped and murdered by a contract killer hired by her husband because he needed the insurance money, then whatever it is, it ain't the gospel.

There have to be times when the church must have the guts to proclaim apocalyptic for there are those times when, despite our hard work, we look into the maw of horror and don't know what to hang onto anymore. There have to be times when the church reclaims the height and depth of Jesus' message or surely warm and fuzzy portions only will fail us when we need the gospel the most. There have to be times when we squarely face evil in all its disguises and preach a loving, non-violent response to it if we are to equip ourselves to the reality of what we may face someday. If our worship does not have that height and depth then it is not the gospel.

This whole day of Tuesday, three days before Jesus died, was spent confronting those few in the religious establishment who had accommodated the oppressors and who had adjusted to those who take from the have-nots and give to the haves. And Jesus concludes these day of confrontation with this apocalyptic imagery.

Two days later, as he celebrated the finest of his Jewish identity, he gave his disciples some bread and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body broken for you.' After the same manner he took the cup, gave it to his disciples and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink of it in memory of me.' Amen.

AFTER CLOSING HYMN (in place of benediction):

UPDATE: Night is falling here in Jerusalem. Jesus appears to have gone to Bethany just east of the city to spend the night there with his disciples. We can only wonder what will happen tomorrow.