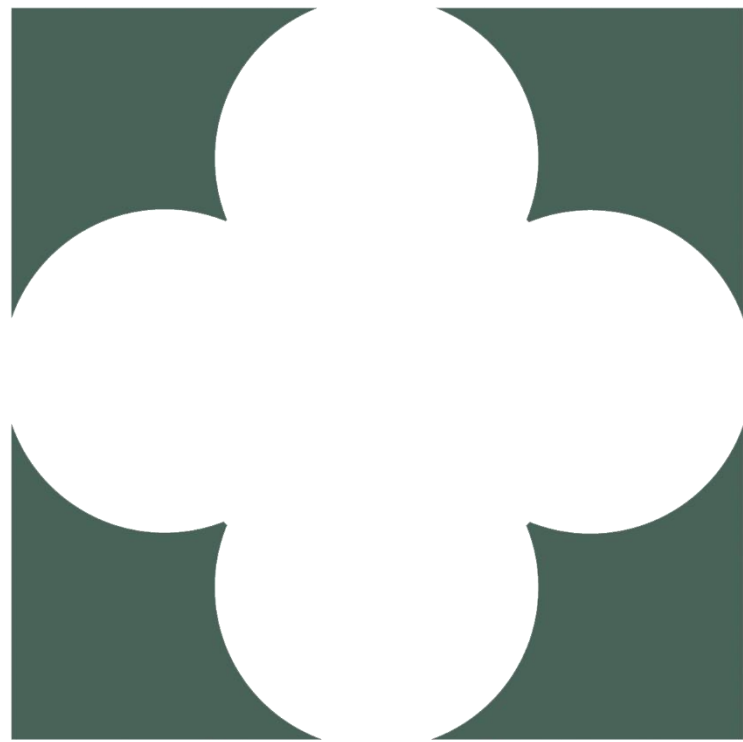


# GOOD NEWS! IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

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Mark 13.1-8

Any time I get to hear a piece of music from Handel's *Messiah*, I am a happy man. So, hearing that Biraj was going to be singing the piece from Isaiah 40.9, that was good news!

*O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion ... lift up your voice, with strength, lift it up, be not afraid, say unto the cities of Judah: Behold your God!*

Beautiful! This text comes from Second Isaiah near the end of Israel's exile and its pending return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. That is good news. It's time to restore that central reference point of the people's identity and the promise of God's presence among them. Tell good tidings to Zion ... behold your God!

And that restored Temple was successfully defended by the Maccabees (that's Chanukah) and it was expanded by Herod into one of the most beautiful structures in the Roman Empire.

So, imagine what kind of bad news it was to hear what Jesus has to say on his way out of the Temple in Mark 13.1-8:

*13As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."*

*3When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. 7When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8For 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 birthpangs.*

The word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God ... Really? Thanks be to God?

Like some of you, I grew up in a church that was obsessed with “last things” and the timetable for the end of the world. The people I knew were very much like the disciples in Mark 13 wanting to know when all these bad things would happen. The difference was that the people I grew up with were convinced that they already had a pretty good idea when it was all going down. And we had to be ready. We were indoctrinated by films like *A Thief in the Night* and books like Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series.

So, getting ready to face this text again, I re-read Dr. LeAnn Flesher’s *Left Behind? The Facts Behind the Fiction*. I recommend it if you find yourself in conversation with friends and family like the conversation Cherry describes in her poem.

And don’t be shocked if you *do* have one of those conversations. Dr. Flesher says that more than sixty million of those *Left Behind* books have been sold. And there was an uptick in sales after the “catastrophic events of September 11, 2001.” At a time when Americans were afraid, unsure of their identity as the most powerful nation on earth, facing the end of the world as they knew it, they went looking for something that would make them fearless, that would restore their faith in their own power, that would recreate the world in their own image.

And that’s not all that surprising because Americans have always been enamored with dramatic apocalyptic visions. It’s probably a carry-over from that deadly and destructive “manifest destiny” myth we like to tell ourselves.

The problem is, Dr. Flesher says, this current version of the end-times vision is both *elitist* – we are the ones and the *only* ones who know the truth – and *escapist* – not to worry about the death and destruction that’s on its way because we know the truth and we will escape the whole thing. Too bad for the rest of you.

The most insidious part of this scheme, for me, is that any bad news ends up being more good news. Earthquakes? Excellent! Massive suffering? Hallelujah! Wars and rumors of war? Thank God! The end is in sight!

In my experience, it doesn't take long living with that world view to end up being cynical about the realities of human life. And Dr. Flesher says there are social and political implications as well.

*It would not be unfair, she says, to suggest that [folks who hold this vision] represent an ethnocentric subculture in the United States and possibly around the world, complete with its own set of social and political agendas. They often oppose humanitarian and social justice efforts (each of which they equate with secular humanism), suggesting that such works to improve the lives of people and challenge unfair social structures represent the end-times apostacy (the abandonment of the faith) described in Scriptures.*

In other words, the only good news is bad news.

You wonder why so many people on the Christian Right either deny climate change or could care less about its effects? Who cares, right? Use this world for all its worth because we are out of here! Jesus is on his way for us.

It would be easy for me to go on but, for now, I have to say that, for me, the most compelling way to think about all this is from a song by the popular group R.E.M, "The End of the World as We Know it." The song appeared 34 years ago this month.

See, I think we are always facing the end of the world *as we know it*.

And before I say more about that, I hope you will forgive me for being a little "Bible Nerdy" for just a minute. Thanks to Dr. Leticia Guardiola-Saenz at Seattle University, I have started to think that the understanding about "the end" and the return of Jesus *evolves* over time in the gospels themselves. This is what I mean:

A little further down in Mark 13, Jesus says: "Then they will see 'the Son of Humanity' coming in clouds with great power and glory." Not a surprise. Mark

is the earliest gospel and the prediction about there being not one stone of the Temple left upon another may have already happened. The 70 CE Roman destruction of the city was of apocalyptic proportions. The Roman historian, Josephus, says more than a million people were killed. Jerusalem and the Temple were obliterated. Forests were cut down. The surrounding “cities of Judah” were destroyed. The ground was salted so that it wouldn’t grow anything.

So, Mark 13 could be less prediction and more *realization* that no glorious restored Temple was ever going to save them. What they needed now was some bigger vision – some good news they could hold on to in order *not* to give up on this promise of a new kind of kin-dom.

Then comes Matthew a few years later who begins his gospel with “Emmanuel – God-*with-us*.” By then the city and the Temple were gone. And perhaps Matthew wants to assure the people that, even without that powerful reference point for their identity and that center for their spiritual lives, God is still with us. And his gospel ends with that famous scene of Jesus gathering all the nations of the earth and judging them by whether they saw him in the hungry and the naked and the prisoners. In other words, in the end, what matters is not looking for Jesus coming in the clouds but seeing him right here and right now in the people who are suffering and enslaved.

And then Luke comes along, who seems to suggest that Jesus is already here through the Spirit embodied in the community. When Peter stands up to preach about the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, he quotes the prophet Joel: “*In the last days*, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young ones will see visions and your elders dream dreams; even upon slaves I will pour out my Spirit.” Those “last days” are *now*, Peter says. He even uses the same kind of end-times language Mark uses in Mark 13 about “signs in the heavens above and on the earth below.” Those last days you are wondering about are *now*. Jesus is already here

through the outpouring of the Spirit and in that inclusive community she is creating.

Much later, we come to John. And John's claim is even further from the earlier gospels about "the end." He says it is all about the beginning: "In the *beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God and was in the *beginning* with God." This Jesus you are looking for has been here all along. He is the Word that took on flesh and lived for a while among us so we could see what grace and truth look like. That Word is from the beginning and is in *this* world, world without end, Amen.

I take the time to say all this because I don't think there is *one* version of "the end" and the return of Jesus. The gospels give us 4 different ones, all *evolving* over time with new experiences and understandings.

What they *do* have in common is that they all recognize we are always facing the end of the world *as we know it*.

Do we need anymore evidence of this than COVID? Is there a "normal" anymore? Doesn't this feel like an end of the world as we have known it?

Dr. Mary Ann Tolbert, says that Mark was written when:

*... native cultures and tribal allegiances began to break down under the influx of new ideas and the emigration of established families either by choice or by force to other regions ... living in a stable universe with familial or tribal solidarity diminished. Alienation, isolation, and anxiety, she says, became the common experience ...*

Sound familiar? Everything is changing. It seems like alienation and isolation and anxiety are everywhere.

But I want to point out that it isn't just "bad news" that can bring an end to the world as we know it.

Yes. COVID brought an end to the world we thought we knew. But so did the development of all those new vaccines. It's a new world of preventing and treating viruses.

Yes. The news about the growing racist violence enabled by people in political power is really bad news. But isn't all the anti-racism work and the anti-antisemitism work good news that might begin to spell the end of a world as we have known it for way too long?

Yes. Divorce can be the end of the world as you knew it. But so also is a marriage.

Death can be the end of the world. But so also is birth. Those of you who are parents know that having a child come into your life is not only the beginning of a new life but the end of your old one.

So, it is not at all surprising to me that Jesus would end his "bad news" about "the end" with: "this is the *beginning of labor pains*."

There is a reason that Charles Jennens, the librettist for *Messiah* goes from Isaiah 40.9, "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion," to Isaiah 9.6: "For unto us a child is born." The good news is that end of the world as we know it is the beginning of labor pains for the birth of something new.

I want to be clear: I say this recognizing that the pain of endings is real. I don't want to pretend that the pain doesn't matter. It does. And grieving is necessary. Acknowledging and honoring pain and grief is often one of the primary ingredients of something new bubbling up.

But the danger for us now is that, because of that pain and grief and anxiety, we may try to hold on to the world that is passing way, to cling to it, to make up false stories about it, to turn it into "glory days" that never were and never will be.

Beloved ones, this *is* the end of the world as we know it. The bad news is that what's coming could be worse. The good news is that it doesn't have to be.

At the end of James Baldwin's book, *The Fire Next Time*, he says:

*If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others – [if we] do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in a song by a slave, is upon us:*

*God gave Noah the rainbow sign,*

*No more water,*

*The fire next time!*

It may be the end of the world as we know it and, unlike R.E.M, you may not be fine with it. Surely there are parts of our experience of this world that *need* to end. But, even then, there is likely to be pain and grieving, alienation, isolation, and anxiety. Even prison can have a familiar security about it.

But for it to be the end of *that* world imprisoned in its own greed and self-destruction, it will take courage. It will take brave space and whatever relatively conscious few we are, like *lovers*, insisting on, or creating, the consciousness of others.

And the good news is: the world will always be more than any one of us alone can know of it.

*O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion ... lift up your voice, with strength, lift it up, be not afraid, say unto the cities of Judah:*

*Behold your God!*

And today, if you hear that voice, do not let even the end of the world as you have known it harden your hearts.



## NOTES

LeAnn Snow Flesher, *Left Behind? The Facts Behind The Fiction* (Judson Press, 2006), pp.7, 10, 36-38. Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary and Historical Perspective* (Fortress Press, 1996), p.39. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage International, original copyright 1962), pp.105-106.

This is the third section of the poem, "Happy Endings," by Cherry Johnson  
[It was read earlier in the service.]

III. *And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Mark 13:7*  
The third largest collection of nuclear weapons in the country  
Lies at Bangor, 19.8 miles WNW of my apartment.  
In the late 70s, during a civil disobedience action there,  
I protested with friends,  
Hoisting a makeshift coffin and sporting handmade signs:  
*Ground Zero,*  
*No nukes is good nukes,*  
*Womyn against nuclear weaponry.*

I'm not sure which was stronger – our fear for what might happen  
Or our belief in our collective power to affect change.  
Forty years later the threat is every bit as strong  
I take heart in remembering a conversation from that day of protest.  
We got to discussing religion –  
This group of mostly post-religious lesbian-feminists –  
And for some reason (which escapes me now)  
I was explaining the difference  
Between the beliefs of the pre- and post-millennial rapturists.

My friends went from disbelief and shock  
To uproarious laughter  
At the thought of some judgmental god  
Snatching the righteous from their daily routines  
While the rest of us were left behind to suffer.

And then, in a moment of sheer delight,  
We turned that image on its head  
And began imagining a new kind of rapture  
In which all weapons and aggressors  
Were suddenly and joyously lifted off the planet  
While the rest of us were reduced to  
Peace.