

First Sunday in Advent

CHRIST: THE ONLY SALVATION FROM TERROR

Mark 13:24-37

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Analysis by James Squire

24 “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. 27Then 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.

28 “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. 29So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34It 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. 35Therefore, 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, 36or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

NOTES: This is part of an entire chapter of apocalyptic talk by Jesus, via Mark the Evangelist. It is part of the hubris of our time (Hal Lindsey being simply one of the most extreme examples) to think that Jesus is talking exclusively about our time, based solely on the fact that the world has it ended before we got here. But a check on verse 14 of this chapter indicates that Mark has his own ideas about what time Jesus was talking about. “‘But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be...,” says Jesus, and then Mark interjects, “(let the reader understand) ...”

Then again, is Jesus really talking specifically about The End of the World? He likens it to a fig tree signaling the arrival of summer, an annual event. He pictures the powers in the sky going all kerflooey. He uses an image—the Son of Man coming in clouds—that his audience, and probably Mark’s too, would certainly associate with the end of the world, and “heaven and earth will pass away” seems like an obvious reference to the end of the world as we know it. And yet, Jesus might just be talking about something else at the same time. Stay tuned...

DIAGNOSIS: Descending into the Abyss

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Distracted by Signs*

Terror has become a viable (though thoroughly unacceptable) expression of power and authority because some have deemed their own death an acceptable price to pay for expressing their anger. It is what Mark, in 13:14 would call the “desolating sacrilege,” which is literally something that replaces life with death masquerading as life. We are bedeviled by terrorism—literally. Naomi Wolf was moved last year to write, The End of America: A Letter to a Young Patriot, an urgent message to the next

generation to pay attention to the desolating sacrilege that is being set up in the Temple of our great Democracy. No doubt the huge recession looming on the horizon could play a role as well. All that is needed by those in power is enough signs in “the sky” to distract us from the bait-and-switch that is taking place. The church also gets distracted, reacting to the signs, struggling to respond in some relevant way to the multiple crises that are exploding all around us. Mostly, we wonder what we should do in the midst of all this. We are unsure of our role.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Asleep at the Switch

Naomi Wolf hoped as she wrote that she wasn't too late with her “letter.” Her fear is that sooner or later the terrible sky that frightens us will put us to sleep with respect to the real problem. When we spend all our time dodging lightning bolts we have given in to the desolating sacrilege by giving in to despair. The signs in the sky become our rulers. We employ terror tactics to fight terrorism. We panic in the face of evil and instead call it “resolve.” “Peace through strength” becomes our mantra. We dream of that elusive day when the “idea” of America, that “shining beacon on a hill” takes over the world and ushers in a new heaven on earth. There's your desolating sacrilege: we believe we can overcome the exploding signs in our sky with our own ingenuity and do for ourselves what only God is capable of doing: achieving our own renewal and rebirth. We lie to ourselves daily, both individually and collectively. We do not see the Son of Man coming because we are not looking for him. We are distracted by the desolating sacrilege.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Dead Suddenly

Being asleep is bad enough. Being awakened suddenly by the master (v. 35) is fatal. The Son of Man is coming some day. Who knows when he will come? It will be a shock that will overload

our system. Having been lulled to sleep by the desolating sacrilege, we will be found out by the master. There will come a day eventually when God will come expecting to see us awake and alert, minding the business of his church, and those who are asleep on that day will not be gathered with the elect (v. 27). They will be scattered instead.

PROGNOSIS: Rescued from the Abyss

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Death turned into Glory*

William Butler Yeats in 1921 asked, "What rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem, to be born?" He appears to have had the Second Coming in mind, even naming it in his poem, but seemingly forgetting that if there will be a Second Coming, there must have already been a First Coming. Indeed there was, and Mark can't wait to finish chapter 13 so he can tell us about it. At midday the Jerusalem sky is ripped open. After all kinds of suffering is thrust upon this one man, Jesus, many signs and wonders occur, though they seem to be noticed at the time only by a Roman Centurion. The sky is darkened, but more than that: life itself is darkened as the suffering servant for nobodies (ochlos) is put to death (v. 24). More than the Jerusalem sky and the Temple curtain are ripped apart; God's own relationship with his Son is changed forever (v. 25). Heaven and earth as they were known at the time were to be known that way no more (v. 30). Only "my words" will survive the cataclysm (v. 31). God's relationship with sin and death is transformed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ—the same Son of Man who is coming again one day. "This generation" (v. 30) truly did see it, but many of them could not believe their eyes. Jesus died the death that was waiting to snatch us out the master's care, and then he awoke from death to bring Life to all of us. Long before "that day or hour no one knows" (v. 32), the whole Second Coming event was rehearsed in the outskirts of Jerusalem

for our benefit. But not simply to show us how to do it ourselves. No, Jesus takes us through his death and rising and makes it our own, so that when the master returns on that fateful day in the future, we have already been awakened from our sleep, that is to say, we have already been resurrected from sin and death.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Gathered and Awakened*

The signs in our sky, the ones that lead to urgent letters to young patriots, should also and more importantly remind us of the one who has already defeated all those powerful forces for us. Not that we should ignore the warning signals raised by such letters being written today, but as we dwell on the fallen nature of the world we live in, we put all our trust in Christ who suffered that fallen nature upon himself in our stead. Long after this world crumbles to nothing, we will still have our place at his side where nothing can harm us. This is not an invitation to abstain from living in this fallen world. On the contrary, it is an invitation to live fearlessly in this fallen world, seeking and joyfully receiving our renewal and rebirth from Christ, in defiance of a world that reaps despair and hopelessness. We trudge bravely through such rubble undeterred by its lies and distractions. And how do we do this? “When they bring you up 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” (v. 11). Christ has a living connection with us in his Holy Spirit sent with us to protect us most importantly from faltering before great trials and tribulations. No matter what trials come our way in this corrupt world, we cannot be separated from the Holy Spirit and her life-sustaining connections.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Focused on Gathering*

When we see the desolating sacrilege set up where it does not belong, namely hiding the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the great and small sinners of the world, we will know what to say and do, thanks to the Holy Spirit who accompanies us into this world, day in and day out. Naomi Wolf's letter has a place in this ministry; in fact, Christ's disciples guided by the Holy Spirit may be able to strengthen such critiques by enabling more people to give them full consideration, freed from the gripping fear of the terrible forces that seem bent on taking over our world. The good news of Christ is our role first and foremost; it supports the notion that no sin needs to be hidden in order to preserve our way of life. No scandal is too earth-shattering to survive unveiling. The worst cataclysm the world can unleash has already been unleashed on Christ and he emerged victorious over it. Furthermore, with a real Savior to offer, we can afford to unmask all the false ones seeking to win our attention and worship these days. We are the angels sent out to gather our fellow elect wherever we can find an audience for the Good News of Christ (v. 27). As for terrorism, it is its faithful adherents who sleep in darkness. They can kill us—and we should surely try hard not to let that happen—but they cannot kill our future. It is their future that is in peril. Rather than join them in that plight by “fighting fire with fire,” Christ empowers us to offer up the Gospel (as preposterous and shameful as that may sound) as an alternative to the gospel of terrorism. Certainly, we are freed from tyranny holding us captive. And we are blessed with a Holy Spirit who can do in us what seems impossible: Give us faithful words to speak.