

HOPE
Mark 13:24-37
Colebrook Congregational Church
First Sunday of Advent 2014

A few Sundays ago, while serving as Superintendent at Founders Congregational Church, I was with the Sunday School, and I was telling them about the Gospel of Mark. I got their attention by saying, The Gospel of Mark has jazz hands. The reason I said this, is that Mark is meant to be performed...and all at once in one sitting, not taken in bits and pieces. I actually experienced the Gospel of Mark this way once at Divinity School. It was a very different and unique way to experience the Gospel message.

It was the earliest written Gospel, during the time of the first generation of Christians. They believed that Jesus and the apocalypse was going to happen during their lifetime. When you take this Gospel all together at once, you can see this. Jesus is always rushing somewhere and the end times are referenced constantly, and in a way that assumes it's going to happen at any moment. The transitions are all, "...and then Jesus did," or said. It has the feeling of being driven, both as Jesus towards the cross, and as if the performers are rushing to finish, just in case Jesus returned during their performance.

[exegesis of the chapter]

Today's lectionary selection comes from the second half of a chapter where Jesus is having a conversation with Peter, James, John, & Andrew. The Disciples marveled at the huge Temple building, and we have confirmation outside the Bible through Josephus that the complex and Temple were MASSIVE, a sight to behold. Then Jesus and those four were on the Mount of Olives next to the Temple and Jesus spoke to them about what Bible scholars call, The Little Apocalypse. He warned them to not be tempted to stray from the faith, not to be alarmed by wars and rumors of war; He said that they would be persecuted for their faith in him, and then that the apocalyptic prophecy found in the Book of Daniel would come about. Our selection starts right after that, and the previous two verses almost sum up this chapter and its message of hope in the midst of despair. They were: "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.” I liked that last clause: I have already told you everything, especially when that reassurance comes from Jesus, that everything will be okay, that he has taken care of everything for us.

Our selection starts with Jesus quoting the Prophet Isaiah, followed by references to the Prophet Daniel. It describes an apocalypse, like everything He said before in this chapter, but this part is more general. This is the point of transition in every good apocalypse. You describe the destruction, but you have to give something for the listener to have hope in. The lesson of the fig tree gives assurance that no matter what happens, the Word of God will prevail, and since they are the followers of the Word, so by extension, they too will prevail in the end. The followers of Jesus were in the minority, and two chapters earlier, Jesus tossed the moneychangers and other vendors out of the Temple, so it is safe to assume, these people were not well-liked. It would be nearly 300 years before it was completely acceptable to be a Christian openly.

To us today, apocalypses look horrific and not something we would look at really all the favorably. However, to that audience, where they expect persecutions, and where they expect to have a difficult time living, apocalypse looks pretty good. Because it gives them hope. It promises them a change from how they have been living. The persecutions would stop, and then they could just live their lives, and things would be better for them.

You cannot have a good apocalypse without hope, and you cannot have hope without a lack of contentment in some way.

Hope is the expectation that something good will happen. It can...give us strength to survive, it can inspire us to make things better, and it can show us the way out of the darkness. And there many types of hope.

As I was driving up here Friday evening for office hours, thinking about what my friends responded with to my question about what hope means to them, I turned on the radio, and the first song I heard was one of my favorites, Gimme Shelter by The Rolling Stones. I really like the tune, and it is also my ringtone. I did not even know what the lyrics were for certain until much

later. I was surprised when I looked them up. It was full of negativity, but it ended with hope. Starting with: A storm threatening my very life today; If I don't get some shelter, I'm gonna fade away. There is fire sweeping our very streets today, burns like a red coal carpet. And the refrain, war is just a shot way. But then it all changed in the last stanza! Love is just a kiss away, and it keeps repeating that, hope among all that despair.

One of my other jobs is a business I run making photographic and sculptural art, custom accessories, and then I bring my entire workshop to conventions and festivals where people dress up in costumes, like renaissance faires, anime conventions, or steampunk events. The people there usually make their own outfits and props, and they do so in the safety of their own homes, but then, when they take their creations out in public, stuff breaks. My workshop is there to fix these breaks.

These people have put a lot of effort into what they made, and are far from home, with little resources on them, and when their stuff breaks, they are feeling devastated and vulnerable. They come to my booth with their broken creations, and since the company running the event takes care of my expenses, I can fix their creations free of charge. I have glued a ballerina into her outfit in a crowded accessway before her performance, I have built a Jim Henson-style dragon prop's controller from scratch before it's demonstration, and have rebuilt things that I don't actually know what they were, but they were important to their creators, and the look on their faces when my crew and I put their creations back together again, and don't charge them, is worth it. We give them hope. Granted, what has happened to them is not so important in the grand scheme of things, but in that moment, to them, it is the only thing that matters.

When you sign up to serve in AmeriCorps, you do so knowing that you are not there make money, but, as the motto goes, to get things done. Our weekly stipend was a joke, and our team made fun of it, but we all hoped that we made it to payday before our bank accounts ran out, we hoped to make rent, and we hoped that nothing happened to us that required money that we did not have.

Even though we spent a lot of time in a place where we hoped to make it through each week, we were able to bring hope to those we served, and seeing the results of our work made it worth it. Our team helped elementary school students who had fallen through the cracks succeed in school, we built houses with Habitat for Humanity and provided blankets and foodstuffs for families in need, and organized educational and artistic after-school alternatives for kids and teens in very unsavory neighborhoods. Even though we were in need of hope, we were able to bring to others.

In this Advent season, we celebrate the coming of four gifts that Jesus will bring us. Hope is the first of these. Jesus brings us hope. The big Hope, the assurance that no matter what happens, as long as we follow Him, He will lead us to safety; but also the everyday hopes. Jesus calls us to serve one another, and sometimes, that serving can bring Hope to someone's life. It can be any type of hope, and can be done in any way, and sometimes, we may never know what the effect we've had on someone and their life, but that shouldn't stop us.

Whether it is a hope that comes from an every day lack of something, a major life event, or the darkest place where someone can be; Hope can inspire, hope can save a day, or even save a life. We can provide hope to someone, knowingly or not, we just have to be on the lookout for those who are in need, and respond to them, and give them HOPE.

Amen.