

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 13:1-8

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This story is the introduction to what is often called the Little Apocalypse. The important thing to recognize about this speech is that it communicates on two levels. It is first of all Jesus' prophecy about what will happen in the future. It is also a description of what is happening in Mark's day and time. This is probably the most direct description of the events of what was happening in Mark's time as we have anywhere in the gospel tradition. That time was the time of the Jewish war. Mark was probably written in the immediate aftermath of that war and the destruction of the Temple, in 70 AD.

The story begins with an allusion to that war: "Not one stone will be left here upon another." The probability is that Jesus' statement refers to something that has just happened, about which all of Mark's listeners know, the destruction of the temple in August of 70 AD. It was the greatest tragedy in the entire history of Israel. Jesus' voice is probably a voice of grief. All Jews from then until now grieve at the loss of the Temple. It is far more appropriate for this to be told in a spirit of grief than, as is often the case, as a note of judgment.

Jesus' voice in the rest of this discourse is addressed to his four friends. They are asking him privately about the signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God, and how they will know that all the things Jesus has been talking about throughout their time together will be accomplished. These are words that speak directly to the experience of Mark's listeners.

Jesus' first injunction is to be aware that no one leads them astray. This has already happened in the experience of the war. Many came saying, "I am the one who will set you free." Such persons led the people of Israel into a disastrous war. The probability is that there will continue to be those who will seek to lead people astray. In the period following the war, this warning became a description of a crime that was identified by the Jamnia Council. The identification as a crime is clearly reflected in the Gospel of John in which Jesus and those who would proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ are charged with leading the people astray. It is on the basis of this indictment that they seek to kill Jesus.

The danger and the tragedy of leading people astray during the period leading up to and during the war was the source of this indictment. No one wanted it to happen again. Jesus' words are told in Mark's context in the immediate aftermath of the war. In part, his statement about the wars and not being alarmed is directed to those who follow him to be calm in the context of the period of the war. He describes this as an inevitable dimension of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The end is not yet; these are but the birth pangs of the new age. The old age, dominated by the powers of this world, is coming to an end. This is a way of understanding the context of the war.

The end of the old age will be followed by a period of peace, of a new age in which the powers of God will be in control. Jesus' teaching is about hope. It is about the immediacy of the promise of new life in the midst of the disaster that has been experienced by the community of Israel. I suggest that you tell this story in a calm and intimate way, as you would if you were talking to people who are dealing with a major national disaster. In the context of Mark's time, the disasters relating to the end of the war make 9/11 look like a minor incident. The voice of Jesus and the voice of Mark are calm and wise in regard to how to respond to their unspeakable tragedy.