

First Presbyterian Church
Mark 13:1-13, “Being Well When Life Goes Wrong”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/23/2022

Throughout October I have been responding to questions which were sent in by congregation members for this Q&A series.

The first week we looked at the question of how we approach evangelism and discipleship.

Last week we considered the question of how historically accurate the Bible is and how much that matters.

Today we have a question which moves in a totally different direction:

- *How can we, as people of faith, stay hopeful in the face of such distressing chaos in our world – wars, climate change, loss of personal choice (particularly for women), bigotry, etc?*

This question hit me right in the heart. News of wars, disease, diminishing rights for women and minorities, political corruption, disasters related to climate change, and (surprising to nobody) decreasing mental health is well summed up by the phrase “distressing chaos.”

And the news has been bleak, not just in the past year but for the past several years. How many of you felt compelled to change your consumption of news media over the last few years?

How many of you have wondered if you are negatively impacted by doom scrolling on websites or social media?

How many of you have sought to find relief in some form from the onslaught of distressing chaos in our world?

I suspect that if we were raising hands, most of the hands in the room would be raised.

How do we stay hopeful in such a time?

How do we not throw up our hands and say, “That’s it, I give up!”

I chose this passage from Mark chapter 13,
because Jesus speaks to the disciples about how they should deal
with a very similar set of distressing events on the way
in their own time.

What we learn from Jesus in this passage might surprise you
and provide a new way of looking at the headlines of our own day.

The first thing that happens in this chapter is that
Jesus leaves the temple, never to return.

Commentator Dale Bruner says that when this happens,
“the Holiest of Holies has left the temple.”

As Jesus is leaving, the disciples say,
**“Look, teacher! What massive stones!
What magnificent buildings!”**

The temple had been under construction for 50 years at that point.
While it was not yet finished, it was already
one of the most complex and architecturally stunning
buildings in the ancient world.

Jesus’ disciples apparently don’t think he has taken
enough notice of how beautiful the temple is.

Jesus replies, **“Do you see all these great buildings?
Not one stone here will be left on another;
every one will be thrown down.”**

Then in verse 3, we have a change in setting.
Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives, *opposite the temple*.
An ancient historian notes that from the Mount of Olives
you could see directly into the entrance
of the temple complex.

Sitting *opposite* the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew
come to Jesus privately, and they ask him,
**“Tell us, when will these things happen?
And what will be the sign
that they are all about to be fulfilled?”**

The disciples have asked Jesus a question *about the temple*.

When they ask, “When will *these things* happen?” they mean,
“When will every stone of the temple be thrown down?”

In his answer, Jesus addresses this question,
but he also looks further into the future
than just the destruction of the temple.
Sorting the two out is where things get difficult.

Again, Dale Bruner helps us out here.
He writes that, **“Jesus’ sermon about *current* events,
especially the imminent destruction of Jerusalem,
becomes a window through which to see Jesus’
view of *end* events,
especially the coming of the Son of Man.”**

What Dale is pointing out is that in Jesus’ response,
he gives two answers to one question asked by the disciples.

He both responds to their question about the temple being thrown down
(and you should know, the temple actually was
completely destroyed in 70 AD),
and he speaks of the day when all powers and authorities
will be thrown down before the Son of Man.

But...despite providing two answers,
Jesus *does not* give the disciples
the kind of answer they were looking for.

Jesus *does not* provide a road map of what is to come after the temple
is destroyed.

Instead, he uses the temple scenario to tell them two things:

- 1) What life will be like while they wait
for the end of all earthly structures.
- 2) How to orient themselves in the meantime.

Look at the first thing Jesus says in verse 5,
“Watch out that no one deceives you.”

Jesus is primarily concerned that we do not get fooled
by other people who use our natural anxiety about the future
to distract us from being a people
who are centered around Christ.

Think about all the deception happening in our own day.
We are constantly being told that up is down and down is up.
Power hungry and deeply self-serving people are
discovered to be involved in salacious corruption
and they say, “No I didn’t – you did!
And you’re accusing me because you’re part of
an evil plot!”

And who is the primary audience for these lies?
People who claim Christianity as one of their central values.

Jesus was worried about his followers becoming targets for disinformation
and so he says, “Watch out that no one deceives you.”

The next thing Jesus does in verses 6 to 13,
is he describes all kinds of things that are going to happen,
but these are not referred to as “signs.”
They are called “birth pains.”

First, there will be false Messiahs.
People will come claiming to be Jesus,
and he says, **“Don’t believe them.”**

Second, there will be global unrest. Wars and rumors of wars.
And Jesus says, **“Do not be alarmed. The end is still to come.”**

Third, there will be ecological disasters such as earthquakes and famines.
And Jesus says, **“These are just the beginnings of birth pains.”**

Fourth, there will be persecution.
Christians will be handed over and flogged
and will testify before the leaders of the nations.
And Jesus says, **“The gospel must be preached to all nations.”**

Along with that, people will be brought to trial.

And Jesus says, **“Do not worry about what you will say,
because the Holy Spirit is speaking through you.”**

Fifth, families will be split apart and betrayal will take place.

And Jesus says, **“Those who stand firm to the end will be saved.”**

Can you think of any era of human history since Jesus
in which any of these things were missing?

But Jesus wasn't giving people signs that would predict
when he was coming.

*Jesus was describing what could be expected
from life between the first Advent of his birth
and the second Advent of his return. [REPEAT]*

Considering all of that,

do you think that Jesus is surprised when things go wrong in our world?

We look at the distressing chaos and think to ourselves,

“We should have avoided all this! Why haven't we solved these problems?
It seems like things are worse than ever!”

But Jesus said all these things would take place 2,000 years ago.

They did happen and they have kept on happening right along.

With historical perspective, things aren't worse than they used to be,
in fact in many ways they are much better!

We should strive to do better but what we cannot expect to do
is change human nature.

Jesus knew our human nature perfectly – from the wondrous beauty
of being made in God's image to the terrible scourge
of our sinfulness.

This means that Jesus laments the developments of our world as much as we do,
and probably much more so! And at the same time
he is not surprised by these developments.

If we return to the question, it asks how we can stay hopeful
with all this distressing chaos swirling around us.

My first response is that we can be hopeful because our God laments the condition of the world but is not surprised or caught off guard.

Second, we can remain hopeful by taking to heart the very specific instructions that Jesus gives the disciples for just such a time:

Along with the predictions of things falling apart, Jesus tells the disciples:

- **v. 5: Don't be deceived.**
- **v. 7: Don't be alarmed.**
- **v. 8: This is only the beginning.**
- **v. 10: The gospel must be preached.**
- **v. 11: The Holy Spirit is with you and speaking through you.**
- **v. 13: Stand firm to the end.**

[REPEAT]

Jesus does not promote an alarmist approach to the future.

Instead, he says, "I know it's hard. Don't panic, hang in there, the Holy Spirit will be with you."

Loss is very personal for all of us. Back in 2018, my father died from Alzheimers.

In 2019 much of my emotional bandwidth was tied up in grief from losing both of my parents by the age of 40.

In 2020 ... well, you know what happened in 2020.

We lost our expectation that medicine and technology would keep us safe.

We lost the ability to meet in person without fear.

In January of 2021 I lost the assurance that our nation would continue having a peaceful transfer of power.

Along the way, many beloved congregation members have died.

Through all of this it struck me: these losses are not likely to stop.

We are likely to continue to get bad news about the integrity of our society, about our ecological crisis, and so on.

This hit me hard because I really wanted to win.

I wanted to be part of a generation to reverse racial and gender discrimination.

I wanted to be part of solving our climate crisis.

All these losses were things I really wanted to win!

To lose and keep losing was demoralizing.

So I had to look at my life and minimize the losses that I went through.

I decided that following sports teams isn't worth it for me –

I don't need those frivolous losses to be places
where my anxiety is ratcheted up.

My phone and internet usage was causing me

to lose my ability to direct my attention with conscious purpose.

So I got rid of my smart phone

and put a timer on my internet browser.

After limiting the losses that I had control over, there are still many that I don't.

And those are the ones that matter the most.

When we come face to face with the reality that we face loss,
that we face chaos, that we face death,

we are in a unique position to understand what Jesus means when he says,

“If anyone would be my disciple,

you must take up your cross and follow me.”

The way of Jesus has never been winning

through supremacy of intellect, strength, or numbers.

Jesus wins by living with unimaginable love for all the losers.

Our hope when life goes wrong is that our faith is made for times like these.

Our hope is that God is not done with this world.

Our hope is that even when the world is falling apart,

we can always point to places where the Kingdom of God
breaks in and surprises us with beauty and joy!

Our hope is that God does not abandon us when we go through loss,

but rather meets us deeply and directly in the place of our greatest pain.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish Nazi concentration camp survivor, a psychologist,
and a person of deep faith.

He knew loss on a level few others can comprehend.

Frankl said, “The one thing you can't take away from me

is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me.

The last of one's freedoms is the ability to choose

one's attitude in any given circumstance.” [PAUSE]

We cannot control what happens in the world, but we can have hope

by choosing to respond as a community overflowing with God's love.