

Mark 13:1-13

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Word of the Lord from Mark 13:13b: "The one who endures to the end will be saved."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you keep an eye on what people are saying about biblical prophecy these days, there's been a significant run of events. Not too long ago, there were reports of fish swimming in the sinkholes at the edge of the Dead Sea, ostensibly a fulfillment of Ezekiel 47:10 that, in the end times, the sea will have fish of many kinds. Along with the fish, folks are keeping an eye on a red heifer recently born in Israel, which so far has no blemish or defect and thus is seen as a fulfillment of Numbers 19:2. At the end of last month, some news outlets went crazy with the news that a snake had crawled out of a hole in the wailing wall in Jerusalem to chase a pigeon, fulfilling biblical prophecy yet again.

Take these three breathlessly-reported signs and add them together, and I am willing to stand here before you today, in this very pulpit, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, and tell you without a doubt that ... I need to find better sources for news.

I mean, fish near the Dead Sea are interesting, but the only way you can make a case that this fulfills Ezekiel 47:10 is if you ignore verses 1-9 ... and 11-12. A red heifer without spot or blemish is very rare, and it will come in very handy for you if you need to be cleansed from touching a dead body in the Old Testament. And as for the snake in the wailing wall, the news reports don't even list a Bible reference for that one; rather, somebody has suggested that since some mystics see a pigeon as a symbol of Israel, a snake chasing a pigeon at the wall means that the nation of Israel will face danger.

In other news, water is wet, the sky is blue, and lentils are a legume.

There's always an appetite for signs about the end. When the world ends, life ends in this world, so people want to know when. Some might look for the sun to wink out. Some might look for asteroids on collision course. Some might look for a red heifer to save a pigeon by stepping on a serpent before it goes to swim with the fish in the Dead Sea.

The disciples are no different in Mark 13. After Jesus tells them that the temple in Jerusalem will be razed to the ground, they ask Him, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"

The disciples ask for a sign, and Jesus gives them a bunch.

He tells them that, in the last days, there will be plenty of false teachers and false religions that promise salvation and lead many astray. He also tells them that there will be wars and rumors of wars. Nations will rise against nations and kingdoms against kingdoms. He further tells them that there will be earthquakes and famines. He goes on to say that there will be persecution, and that sometimes it will bitterly divide families as people betray relatives to death.

You're probably thinking, "But those things have already happened and are still happening," and you're absolutely right. This means two things. First, it's yet another indication in Scripture that we're living in the Last Days, as we have been for the past 2000 years. Second, Jesus Himself says in our text that such things "must take place, but the end is not yet." In other words, He doesn't answer the disciples' question. As He often does, He redirects to what He would have people know. He tells them

what the world is going to be like from now until it ends. It's going to suffer the wages of sin. Whether it's nature convulsing or man's inhumanity, creation will preach a relentless sermon of law that there's something seriously wrong, that this world – along with everything and everybody – is falling apart.

Jesus doesn't answer the question. That's another reason why people want signs of the end, because sinners so often fixate on the questions Jesus doesn't answer rather than answers that He gives. Rather than content themselves with what Jesus does say, they tend to make up stuff He doesn't say and then insist it must have been what He meant. Or else, they use their puny minds to figure out that Jesus must have meant a certain war juxtaposed with a specific earthquake, and then declare that they've figured out when the world will end, and why you'd better send them all your money before it does.

They also tend to insist that Jesus would give us signs for the end, because ... what sort of a Savior would say that Christians are to live by faith, not by sight?

Oh, right. Jesus says that.

Jesus doesn't say when the end will come. Instead, He tells you what things will be like until it *does* end. That's more important for several reasons. For one, it's easy to look around this world with its wars, persecutions and disasters, and conclude that this world is God-forsaken – if He ever cared in the first place. It's easy to grow discouraged or despair. Thus when Jesus describes the world and its turmoil, He's saying, "Don't be surprised when bad things happen, because that's what happens in a sinful world." Remember that, because even Christians are tempted to wonder if God still cares when a disaster takes place. They may witness all sorts of natural catastrophes and violent acts of terror with faith intact, but then start to doubt God's mercy when they suffer personal tragedy. Keep this in mind: if bad things happen in this world and you are in this world, then bad things will happen to you. But that does not mean that God has forgotten for forsaken you. It means that Scripture is accurate when it describes the world.

There's another good reason why Jesus doesn't tell you when the world will end: what matter far more is when your life will end. Sure, it will end if the Last Day comes soon; but if this planet keeps spinning for the next thousand years, your end will come far sooner. Rather than worry about the big picture, tend foremost to your own soul. Our lives could end before this sermon does: are you ready if that's the case?

This isn't the cheeriest sermon so far. Jesus doesn't say what everybody wants to know, but instead He tells you to expect trouble. But throughout this text, Jesus says several things that we dare not overlook.

First, He says that the world will not end before the gospel is preached to all nations. Too often, I've heard people regard this as an annoying bit of law, that this world has to keep limping along until you Christians get your act together and knock on every door in town. I would suggest instead that there is much comfort to be found: if the gospel is preached in the world and eventually to all nations before the world ends, it means that the Church remains to proclaim the gospel to all nations until the end. The Lord will preserve His people! Despite the wars and persecutions and outright attempts by some to violently end the proclamation of Christ in this world, the Lord won't let it happen. The Church will never perish; and that's saying something because in human terms it should have been obliterated a long time ago. It will suffer trouble, but the Church is founded upon Christ, who died and rose again; and so God's people will remain to proclaim to all nations that Christ has died and is risen again.

Second, when facing trouble and persecution, God is not far away. The Holy Spirit gives His people the words to speak because the Holy Spirit is near, with them, as near as His means of grace. As simple as it sounds, you can be sure that you're not God-forsaken because He still raises up people in baptism, because His Word still rings out, and because He still visits in, with and under bread and wine.

Third, when Jesus describes all this horrible trouble, He calls them birth pains. Birth pains! The end is not the end, but the beginning of new life. A mother suffers the pains of labor, but the pain and labor end; and then she holds an infant in her arms. In Christ, the end is not the end. The end here, with all of its pains, is only the beginning. The new life that follows is the resurrection of the body and the life *everlasting*. As we've said before, your story has a few troubling chapters along the way, and perhaps in the future; but there is no doubt that, in Christ, the ending is *spectacular*.

Finally, the text ends with Jesus saying, "The one who endures to the end will be saved." We tend to hear this and end up thinking, "If I can just stay strong enough, if I can just forge ahead, take the hits and withstand the assaults, then I will be saved." That would be true *if* Jesus were saying, "Take heart – whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger!" That's no comfort at all, because your strength is no match for the assaults of the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh. But Christ is; and so that you might endure, He is your strength and your salvation. How do you endure to the end? By remaining in Christ. By confessing your sins and being forgiven. By often receiving His body and blood for forgiveness, faith and life. As our epistle concludes, you do not neglect meeting here together, for this is where you receive the Lord in His means of grace. This is where you encourage one another with the Word, even as the Word encourages you.

So, be of good courage! We do not know when the world will end, and none of knows when our own end will come. But while you don't know that answer, you have the answers you need: in the midst of trouble, the Lord preserves you as He preserves His gospel among the people. He continues to send forth His Holy Spirit to work and strengthen faith. Because Christ has died and is risen, the death throes of this world are the birth pains of a new heaven and a new earth – and because Christ has died and is risen, He will raise you from the dead.

You don't know when the end comes, but you do know that in Christ you are prepared; for in Christ, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen