



WAKE UP

KATHLEEN RUSHTON interprets Jesus's sermon in Mark 13 uncovering the symbolic language and urging us to stay awake in our world.

Mark 13 is an example of a type of writing we call “apocalyptic”. “Apocalypse” means “unveiling” and describes the revelations told — in the form of visions, symbols and vivid images — by a superhuman being to a human intermediary. Such revelations allow us to see our experience within a larger context and imagine a new world. Mk 13:4-37 is a sermon about the coming of the *basileia* of God, not revealed from heaven but from the mouth of Jesus on Earth. This sermon, moving between reassurance and warning, looks beyond the time span of the Gospel and addresses the situation of readers past and present. There is no simple application for our times, but the urgency and insistence that accompanies Jesus's message exists for us today.

Jesus leaves the Temple which he had earlier closed down (Mk 11:15-17). The disciples marvel at its beauty (Mk 13:1). In 19 CE, Herod began massive renovations of the Temple which were completed 45 years later in 64 CE. Jesus's description of Jerusalem's destruction (Mk 13:2) tells of events which are likely to have occurred. In the spring of 70 CE, the Roman general Titus set up camp to prepare a siege wall. Eventually, the city was captured and the Temple destroyed.

Mark's criticism of the *basileia* of Rome is veiled because the armies of Titus are already in control of Galilee. In contrast, the Temple and its leaders are denounced vehemently. Just prior, Jesus had accused scribes of devouring widows' houses (Mk 12:40). The story of the poor widow critiques the temple treasury practice (Mk 12:41-44).

Gospel Context of Mark 13

Jesus and disciples were “on the way to Jerusalem” (Mk 8:31-10:52). Now, a series of “endings in Jerusalem” unfolds: the end of Temple worship as a way to God (Mk 11:1-25); the end of the authority of Jewish leadership (Mk 11:27-12:44); the end of Jerusalem (Mk 13:1-23) and the end of the world as we know it (Mk 13:24-27). Mark 13 is balanced between the end of the public ministry of Jesus, after which he goes underground (Mk 14:1), and

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the beginning of his way to the cross. “The way” of Jesus encounters opposition and leads to the cross. This, too, will be the disciples’ experience on “the way” of Jesus in his day, in Mark’s time and in all times. This reality is the backdrop to Mark 13.

The Imperative — “Watch!”

Jesus sat down on the Mount of Olives opposite the Temple (Mk 13:3), a setting evocative of a well-known tradition. From there, the Messiah will intervene in the crucial hour of Jerusalem’s need (Zechariah 14:2-4). The sermon is arranged around the imperative “watch” (Mk 13:5, 9, 23, 33). The literal sense of the eye seeing extends to the intuitive, critical level of looking deeply into, seeing through, becoming aware of the essence. A religious view is implied — view of God, insight into the cosmic order and universal world. Often in the New Testament, “watch” suggests seeing the processes of understanding which lead to faith in God and in Jesus. Bibles variously translate “watch” as “take care”, “be on your guard”, “take heed”, “beware” or “be alert”.

Despite Jesus’s efforts, the disciples don’t get it. They weren’t able to “stay awake” — instead they flee from what Jesus wants to show them . . . Any more than in Jesus’s time, do we “get it” today?

Jesus exhorts the disciples to “watch” (Mk 13:5). He clears the ground of all that could be interpreted falsely as “signs”. Signs of false prophets, wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes and famine on such a scale that the whole world order would appear to be collapsing (Mk 13:6-8). His next “watch” (Mk 13:9) zooms in closer to home. Trials and persecutions are to be endured. In this turbulence, Jesus’s primary focus is that “the good news must first be proclaimed to all the nations” (Mk 13:10).

What we are told in Mk 13:14-20 is so anchored in its original context that it is impossible for us to unravel. We are best to approach “watch” in Mk 13:23 as an invocation of Mark’s conviction that all remains in the hands of God.

Climax of the Sermon

The climax of Jesus’s sermon attempts to describe the transcendent reality of the establishment of the *basileia* of God on Earth by using vivid language and symbols (Mk 13:24-27). The whole cosmos is affected — sun, stars, the powers of heaven. The risen Jesus is active in the cosmos and “his elect” being gathered “from the four winds” suggests that the Gospel has been preached to all and the *basileia* of God established.

Two parables follow. Earlier, Jesus had cursed the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14). The blossoming and fruiting fig tree is found in First Testament passages about God visiting the people with blessing. The fruitful fig tree, unlike most trees in Palestine, was deciduous, so its budding leaves signalled

summer was near. The whole cosmos is affected by signs that prepare the hearts of disciples for God’s final coming. God will overcome evil.

“Stay Awake” Always

The word “watch” (Mk 13:33) opens the second parable addressed to disciples, who are to be like “servants” awaiting the return of Jesus. Then, the imperative “stay awake” (Mk 13:35,37) is introduced. This verb, commanded also of the door keeper (13:34), means “stay awake,” “be vigilant.” Where else do we find, “Stay awake”?

The Gospel moves to the last supper and the passion. Mark uses “evening”, “midnight”, “cock-crowing” and “morning” — the times of the four duty watches of the Roman military sentinels. The *evening* of the last supper (Mk 14:17) is the first watch. From there, Jesus and his disciples go to Gethsemane. Twice Jesus implores Peter, James and John to “Stay awake” (Mk 14:34, 38) because they would not “keep awake” one hour (Mk 14:37). Where are the disciples? How do they respond at the second watch of *midnight*, the time of Peter’s denial (Mk 14:30)? At the third watch of cock crow, the specific time of Peter’s denial (Mk 14:30, 72)? And then at the fourth watch of *dawn* when Jesus is handed over to the Romans (Mk 15:1)? The disciples did not stay awake. They fled.

Do We Get It?

Despite Jesus’s efforts, the disciples don’t get it. They weren’t able to “stay awake” — instead they flee from what Jesus wants to show them. And so, the way through the struggle is the way of the cross. Today, we will need no small measure of historical empathy to understand how difficult it was to “believe” in an end to the world of the Temple. Any more than in Jesus’s time, do we “get it” today?

Maybe the sermon primarily deals not with the destruction of the Temple or Jerusalem but the fate of the present world. The Christian community is called to live in history with open eyes, to look deep into past events, beyond the conflicting claims of those vying for power. We can read Mark 13 as an “apocalypse” that invites us to “unveil” our world — to search for, and work against the roots of violence and oppression. Chad Myers calls Mark 13 a sermon on revolutionary patience. The coming of the *basileia* of God is in solidarity with Earth and the human family in its dark night of suffering. Never have members of the Earth community been so alert to a global crisis of such social, economic and ecological proportions. German theologian Dorothee Soelle encourages contemplation as revolutionary patience which opens up new creative abilities, energy and ways to respond. ●

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