

Sermon Title: Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Sermon Text: Mark 13: 24-37

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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You probably have heard me tell this story before but I have to tell it again. There was a little boy who wanted a special watch for Christmas. He kept pestering his parents about it. One day his father said, "Son, you are driving me crazy. If you so much as mention that watch again, you are not going to get it." A couple of days later the family gathered for dinner; the first time in quite a while the whole family was at the table together—dad, mom, and the three children. Dad said, "Before we eat let's go around the table and share what we like most about this time of year. I'll start." The little boy was the last to speak. When they finally got to him, he said, "What I like best are the advent readings at church. My favorite is Mark 13:37—"What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

Our Gospel text is the concluding part of a very unusual text. Some of have called it "the little apocalypse" but it's not exactly an apocalypse, though it contains a number of apocalyptic images and symbols. There are some who think this passage is part of a prophecy of the end of the world. One group of Christians who take Mark 13 in a futuristic way are dispensationalists. They believe that history can be divided into seven dispensations or ages. We are living now, they say, in the church age. This age will end with the rapture of the church, a secret snatching away of Christians (which, by the way, is not in the Bible). That will be followed by seven years of tribulation which will climax in the Battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ. Christ's coming, according to this view, begins a new age or dispensation consisting of a one thousand year or millennial kingdom on earth. Sometimes you can tell these Christians by their bumper stickers. Like the one that says, "In case of rapture, the driver of this car will disappear." I personally like the one that says: "When the rapture comes, can I have your car?"

This system of interpretation began with a man by the name of John Nelson Darby, who was a kind of a renegade Anglican priest originally from Ireland. In this country it was popularize by the Scofield Reference Bible. C.I. Scofield adopted this system and expounded it in his Bible notes, which became a very popular Bible among evangelicals. For a number of conservative Christians Scofield's notes were regarded as infallible as the biblical text itself.

Hal Lindsey's book in the early seventies, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, took this approach and Billy Graham also bought into it. Today these ideas have spread through the immensely popular *Left Behind* novels by Tim LeHay and Jerry Jenkins that have sold millions of copies. From an academic standpoint there are a handful of seminaries and Bible schools that teach this system of interpretation, the most recognized of which is

Dallas Theological Seminary in Texas. And of course we have TV preachers, like John Hagee, with their prophetic calendars who pontificate on the last days.

When you think about it the end of the world is relative to our experience. Mark's Gospel was most likely written during or just after the Jewish revolt that resulted in the Romans sweeping into Jerusalem, destroying the city and the temple. This was about the time the Roman emperor's favorite pastime was one of dreaming up ways to put Christians to death. False prophets were setting up shop and whole families were being torn apart by divided loyalties. Everything was falling apart. The world they knew was collapsing. There was a shaking of the foundations; the sun, moon, and stars falling from the heavens.

And you know sisters and brothers, in a manner of speaking, the world can end any day of the week for any of us—with the collapse of a marriage or partnership, the death of a child, a grim diagnosis, a declaration of bankruptcy, the loss of everything in a sudden fire or natural calamity, a permanent disability from a car accident—there are any number of ways our world can fall apart and we can find ourselves in darkness.

What we are assured of in this Gospel text is that the living Christ will come again in power and glory into our broken lives and communities to bring healing and hope. The promise of the gospel is that out of deconstruction comes reconstruction. And sometimes it is necessary for the new to come; our kingdom has to go before God's kingdom can come.

A contemporary dramatic portrayal of this theme is found in the movie *Regarding Henry*, which tells the story of Henry Morris (played by Harrison Ford), a highly successful lawyer in New York City given to climbing the corporate ladder, maintaining his image and lifestyle at any cost, and doing whatever it takes to win.

Then one night he walks out of his lavish New York City suite to a convenience store to get a pack of cigarettes. He finds himself in the middle of a robbery and is shot in the chest and head. Miraculously he survives. Doctors save his life, but he requires months of hospitalization and therapy. He can't walk and he has no memory of his previous life when he enters into an intensive program of rehabilitation

After many months of therapy he tries to resume his life again. He discovers some troubling things. He learns that his wife has been unfaithful to him and that he has been unfaithful to her. He finds out that he and his law firm withheld evidence in court that prevented a critically ill patient from obtaining a settlement from the hospital he was defending. He finds himself deeply troubled by all of this because he is becoming a different person. Out of his deconstruction he is being reconstructed into a more caring, compassionate person.

I have about a five minute segment that I want you to view where we see Henry as a changed person (Scene 14 on the DVD) . . . I like the part about the clothes. Paul uses the imagery of putting off old clothes and putting on new clothes in a couple of his letters. In his letter to the church at Colossae he tells them: “As God’s dearly loved children clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven you. And above all, put on love, which binds all of these virtues together.” (See Col 3:12-14). Out of

Two parables set side by side in our Gospel text conveys two different perspectives on the spiritual life, not contradictory perspectives, but complimentary. On the one hand, the parable of the fig tree, suggests that we should be able to discern the signs of the times. When one sees the fig tree start to bud one should know that summer is near. In like manner, if we are spiritually awake and watchful we should be able to discern God’s rule, God’s dominion, God’s healing, redeeming, transforming presence and power breaking into our lives and into our world. Sometimes this is a very subtle process; other times it’s like lightning flashing across the sky. Either way God is at work and we should be able to discern the “signs” of Christ’s living presence among us.

On the other hand, we don’t know the day or hour when the Son of Man will break into our lives with healing and transforming power. There is mystery and unpredictability in the workings of God. In John’s Gospel the recreating, regenerating Spirit of God is likened to wind which is completely unpredictable and uncontrollable. We see its effects and can hear its sound, we can observe “signs” of the Spirit’s presence and work, but we don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. This is not something we can manage or control.

I think Mark’s church, the faith community out of which this Gospel emerged and to which it was written, was struggling with a sense of the absence of Christ. This is the Gospel that tells us that Jesus cried in anguish to God upon the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Jesus felt the absence of God on the cross. Also, the Gospel ends abruptly with no resurrection appearances to the disciples. The disciples are told to go to Galilee and the promise is given to them that in Galilee they will see Jesus again, but in Mark Jesus doesn’t appear. And that’s how the story ends. There is no appearance; they are waiting to see Jesus. They are waiting for Jesus to come to them.

Here in our passage the disciples are told to stay awake, to be alert, to watch—because no one knows when Jesus will come. I’m talking spiritually, not literally. We don’t know when Jesus will come with healing and redemption.

We all go through this. The promise that Christ will come and the command to watch given to Mark’s church is just as relevant and contemporary for us. When our world falls apart, when the sun, moon, and stars refuse to give their light, when the foundations are

shaken, and it seems that Christ is no where to be found, we are to stay awake and watch, because Christ will come.

But that doesn't mean that we are to be idle, we are not to camp out at the door and wait. Like in the parable, everyone has their assigned task. We are to be about the business of living, serving, and loving. In colonial New England, I have heard, a meeting of state legislators was plunged into darkness by a sudden eclipse. Many of those present panicked and wanted to adjourn. But one of them said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move that candles be brought."

When you find yourself enveloped in darkness, when the world collapses all around you, when the light of the heavenly bodies are snuffed out, when the foundations of your life are shaken, don't panic, don't despair. Break out the candles, keep breathing, keep loving, keep serving, keep praying, keep doing what you do, and keep watching—stay awake, stay alert—because Christ will come; in power and glory Christ will come with healing in his wings.

Keep us, Lord, from wild speculation about the end of days and when our world falls apart, may we not panic, but may we have the faith and courage to keep watching, to remain faithful, to keep praying and serving your cause, knowing that our Lord will come to save and redeem. Strengthen now our hearts and give us the will and power to let go of all those things that keep us trapped in our selfishness and greed and to clothe ourselves with your love and compassion.