

November 18, 2018

Big Questions: “What?” Instead of “When?”

Daniel 12:1-3, Mark 13:1-13

The location of Jesus’ discussion about The End in Mark 13 is important to understand the deeper truths of His answer to the disciples question. Even though we’re looking at verses 1-13, we’ll also be keeping in mind the whole chapter; Jesus’ longest discourse in Mark’s Gospel.

The fact that Jesus has taken His disciples “opposite the temple” is more than a point of interest for Holy Land tour groups. His journey across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives signifies His direct opposition to the leadership of the temple. The temple was, in fact, the most imposing structure in the entire known region, still under construction. Herod had been working on this trophy for decades, which boasted massive stones that have been uncovered archeologically – some of them measuring over 40 feet and weighing an estimated million pounds.

From where Jesus is teaching many believe He would have been in direct line of sight to the entrance of the temple. According to Zechariah 14:4, the Mount of Olives was the predicted place for the coming of Messiah – not the temple. What Jesus says, before He even opens His mouth, is that He’s DONE with the structure and leadership of the temple; and that it won’t last much longer. “Not one stone will be left upon another!”

Most of the questions have ceased by Mark 12:34; at least from those trying to destroy and disrupt and distract others from the mission of Jesus. But Jesus can still ask questions, even in the form of a riddle – as Jason reminded us last week. And His disciples are allowed to ask questions too; because they really want to know the truth. That doesn’t mean they’re asking the best, most important (REALLY BIG) questions. Actually, their questions sort of miss the point – as ours so often do. They’re asking questions (and that’s a good thing), but maybe it’s the wrong question. They’re asking “When?” Jesus wants to talk about “What?”

“Tell us, WHEN will all this [Messiah and temple stuff] happen?” (Mark 13:4) “When?” “When?” “When?” Tell us. We really want to know. Jesus doesn’t give them a definitive answer. In fact, if you cheat forward to next week’s passage, Jesus says He doesn’t know the answer (Mark 13:32); only the Father knows.

So in the absence of an answer from Jesus – the Lord of the Universe – the Church has taken upon itself the responsibility of answering this question; making prediction after prediction, chart after chart, book after book. And it didn’t just start with Hal Lindsey’s “Late Great Planet Earth” in the 70’s or some of the more recent End Times predictions and proclamations. If you do a simple search of “End Times Predictions in the Church” you will be amazed at the list. It goes

back to the first century, includes the names of some people like Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards. There's even a handful of people – men and women – who have three or four predicted dates for The End.

And none of the predicting is based on Jesus' answer to His disciples' question. He did say certain things would happen: false Messiahs, wars, earthquakes, and famines. And you can see why some of the charts and predictions would be connected to some of these events. But Jesus was also quick to add, "but the end is still to come . . . and this is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (Mark 13:7b, 8b) Jeremiah and Micah used this 'birth pang' language centuries before. It's a clue of things to come but not very specific or accurate – as many mothers who have given birth will testify. (How many of you had 'false alarms'?)

The most specific event Jesus relates to The End is that "The Good News must first be preached to all nations." (Mark 13:10) And this specificity of global evangelization is surrounded by the promise of persecution. The language Jesus uses to describe this persecution sounds a lot like what Daniel says would be a "time of great anguish/distress." (Daniel 12:1)

You may or may not know this, but when (this is a "When?" question too) has the Christian faith spread most widely, deeply, and quickly? During times of great persecution. That was true in the Early Church – which has no doubt already happened by the time Mark's Gospel is fully written down. It was also true in China a generation ago. Tertullian was right when he said in the second century that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Before I move us beyond the "When?" question, I do want to stop and ask two questions:

- How serious are we about helping the Good News of Jesus get told throughout the entire world?
- And how willing would we be to face persecution; even pray for it?

I've noticed a LOT of excitement around the "When?" question, but much less interest in making sure the Gospel goes global – reaching every ethnic and people group. And I think it's safe to say in 27 years as a pastor I have never been asked to pray that we would face persecution SO THAT we might become more dialed in to becoming the "fishers of people" and "salt and light" we are called to be.

We are infatuated with "When?" . . . as long as it doesn't cost us too much.

But Jesus is focused on "What?" instead of "When?" He was much more specific about the posture of His disciples than answering their "When?" question.

He said,

"Don't let anyone mislead you." (13:5) Just because someone says, "I am he" doesn't mean they're telling the truth.

“Don’t panic.” (13:7) The last thing we need are a bunch of anxious and reactionary folks running around in My name.

“Watch out.” (13:9) If you think you can just relax, you’re missing the fact that a great battle is underway.

“Tell them about Me.” (13:9) Even as you are persecuted and stand before councils in synagogues, make sure you keep pointing people to Me.

“When you are arrested and stand trial, don’t worry.” (13:11) One of the best ways to bear witness to the truth of who I am is to be unflappable.

“Endure until the end.” (13:13) This isn’t a sprint. It’s a marathon.

Jesus pays way more attention to the “What?” than the “When?”

Let’s be honest about the real reasons for our “When?” (and many of our “Why?”) questions: We want to avoid actually having to DO what God is calling us to do in the way He calls us to do it . . . IN THE PRESENT. We would much rather speculate about the future but Jesus cares about RIGHT NOW way more than someday in the future.

In Jim Edwards commentary on Mark 13, he makes this point over and over again. He says, “The disciples – Mark’s audience – want to know the future. Jesus, however directs them unswervingly to the present.” A little later he adds, “The point is clear and forceful: the challenge of faith is not to figure out the future but to remain steadfast in the present.” And I love this good word: “The purpose of this litany of [catastrophes] is *not* to lure believers into speculations about the end, but to anchor them to faith in the present.”

We want to avoid the present – so we stay on the “When?” question – AND . . . OR we want to know “When?” to be in control; to know the answers; to catalogue life and take away all mystery; we sort of want to play God . . . or at least we think we might like to give it a try from our own little corners of the world. And it’s so subtle – using a “When?” to gain control. Just how subtle can our need to control be?

Just this week, while praying the Prayer of Relinquishment, I got the answer to this question. The first thing I remember was getting to: “I surrender to You my hopes, my dreams, my ambitions. Do with them what You will, when You will, as You will.” I don’t always focus on the same things, but this particular time I locked in on my dreams. And I started realizing there are some dreams driving me that I’m not even aware of yet. And some of those dreams are from God and some are not. So I asked God to make clear the ones that are – to let them bubble to the surface; and do the same with the ones that are not of God so we can get them out of the picture. I also realized that the dreams driving me which are NOT of God could also just disappear, without me even knowing they were ever there. So I asked God to make them go away. And then I went on with the Prayer of Relinquishment. “I place into Your loving care my family, my

friends, my **future**. Care for them with a care that I can never give.” So I started picturing a future in which only God’s dreams for me and His Kingdom were the driving force of my life. And before I knew it I was constructing what that would look like – with my family and my friendships and my ministry. And then I got to the next line of the prayer “I release into Your hands my **need to control** . . .” And it suddenly dawned on me: for the last however many minutes I’ve been telling God what to do with my dreams and my future. I’ve been trying to control what God should and shouldn’t do. (“Make my dreams bubble up, sooner rather than later. Let the ones not of You die. Let’s get moving God. I’ve got a future out there, You know.”) We love to focus on the “WHEN?” stuff – especially when it helps us avoid or control.

I/We need to be less concerned about the future – MY future or the future of my family and friends, or the future of our church – so that I/we can be aware of the “WHAT?” God is actually calling us to in the present. “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us (do “WHAT?”) REJOICE(!) and be glad in it.” Not plan, not predict, not try to control. Rejoice!

But just so we don’t walk out of here thinking that belonging to God in Jesus Christ is mostly about our behavior – shaping up, and getting our stuff together – let me make it clear that there is another “WHAT?” which is immensely more important: THE “WHAT?” regarding WHAT has already been accomplished for us in Jesus Christ.

At the heart of The Story written by God and revealed in scripture there isn’t a “When?” – it’s more around the edges. Nor is the center of God’s Story mostly about “What?” we are called to DO. At the center of it all – the crux of the matter, as we might say – is a Cross.

As Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives, opposite the Temple, He knew that everything we could ever accomplish or construct would never stand until the end of time – as large and impressive as our projects may be. He knew that all of our striving and building – even religious striving and building – would crumble into pieces. He knew that the only hope of the human race was a perfect sacrifice – one that would take away the sins of the world once and for all. [In Matthew’s gospel He actually says, “One greater than the temple is here!” (Matthew 12:6)] Jesus became that perfect sacrifice, not in the Temple, but on that Cross.

Because of “WHAT?” Jesus has done, we don’t have to worry about the “WHENS?” of life. Instead, we are free to live in obedience out of deeply grateful hearts. And that means we can truly make our lives an endless THANKS GIVING!