

## “Are We There Yet?”

“Beware that no one leads you astray.”

“*Are we there yet?*”

These may be every parent’s least favourite words to hear from their children when they are on a long car trip. It may be to a family gathering, or a long-anticipated trip to Disney World, or to a summer vacation at the family cottage. No matter what the destination may be or how many kilometers the trip will involve, as soon as the family car has left the driveway the questions from the back seat begin: “*Are we there yet?*”

The childhood impatience in reaching a destination often does not end when we become adults. Even with advancements in navigational technology such as Global Positioning Systems that give an estimated time of arrival at one’s destination, we may often find ourselves getting bored after hours in the car, staring out the window and wondering how long it will take until we finally arrive at the place to which we are traveling. Our impatience in reaching our destination is not limited to traveling; we may be counting the days until the end of a school year, or when a dear friend arrives for a visit, or when a serious medical regimen comes to its conclusion. While it may be true that “the journey is as important as the destination,” for many people the journey is a necessary nuisance that we must endure so that we might reach the place where we really want to be.

In today’s Gospel lesson, the fact that Jesus and his disciples have reached their destination of Jerusalem does not stop our Lord’s followers from speculating when future goals might be reached. We are again hearing accounts from Mark about what happens to our Lord and the disciples in the days in between Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, to be followed by his arrest at Gethsemane and his condemnation and crucifixion on Good Friday. In last week’s Gospel lesson, Jesus condemns the scribes for their lavish lifestyle that is funded by their “devouring widow’s houses” (Mark 12:40), and his observation that the poor widows have contributed more to the Temple treasury than the rich people whose large contributions are applauded by the assembled crowd. For Jesus, the widow is “the one to watch” because in her sacrifice of all that she has

he sees a foretaste of his sacrifice of his very life for the sake of God's people and their salvation. The narrative continues when Mark reports that "*as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!'''* (13:1). Despite Jesus' warnings that his followers should not be taken in by appearances of wealth, the disciples are awed by the massive masonry of the Herodian Temple and the extensive buildings that were a part of the Temple complex. By all accounts, this Temple was a most impressive building: the Jewish historian Josephus reports that the largest stones in the Temple measured sixty-eight feet long, nine feet high, and eight feet wide. Archaeological excavations have confirmed that the stones used to build the Temple were huge, weighing as much as five hundred tons. It is no wonder that the disciples were awed by such an impressive sight.

But Jesus does not share their sense of awe over the impressive architecture of the Temple. Instead, Jesus makes a dire prediction about its future: "*Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*" (13:2). Jesus echoes the prophets of the Old Testament who had made similar predictions about the fate of the first Temple that had been built on this site by Solomon: "*Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.*" (Micah 3:12). This will be the fate of this Temple when Jerusalem is conquered and destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, ending worship in the Temple and causing Judaism to transition into a rabbinic faith centered in synagogue worship.

Such an unexpected prediction on the fate of such an impressive edifice causes four of Jesus' disciples to ask him about when this will occur. This happens as the scene shifts to the Mount of Olives as Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Bethany, where they will spend the night. From this vantage point, the Temple is still in view; from the Mount of Olives there is a panoramic view of Jerusalem with the Temple mount in the foreground. Viewing the Temple that Jesus has predicted will one day be destroyed, four of his disciples approach Jesus and ask him, "*Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?*" (13:4). It is significant that these four disciples are identified as Peter, James, John, and Andrew, the same four disciples who were the first to hear Jesus' invitation to discipleship on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: "*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*" (1:17). These four followers ask Jesus to give them a sign to indicate when the destruction of the Temple will occur; in a sense, they are asking how long they will have to wait until this cataclysmic event takes place, wondering how long they must journey until they have reached this destination.

The question the four disciples ask links the destruction of the Temple with the end of all things. But instead of offering them their desired sign of when this will take place, Jesus warns his disciples to “*beware that no one leads you astray*” (13:5). Jesus is aware of the threat his followers will encounter from the appearance of deceivers, wars, and upheavals in nature. Jesus’ exhortation is that his disciples “take heed” and not be led astray by those who will offer false predictions about the end of time and point to current events as proof of their false claims. Jesus’ warning speaks of false prophets and messiahs who will come in Jesus’ name, claiming that “*I am he!* and they will lead many astray.” (13:5). The expression “in my name” implies acting with an authority derived from Jesus himself. The authority with which the false prophets interpret current events as evidence that the end is near is undermined by the catalogue of evils that are at best a prelude of the end times:

- “When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” – 13:7-8.

The idea that wares and destruction in Jerusalem will be part of the initial events leading up to the end times is also found in the writings of the prophet Daniel: “*After the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed.*” (Daniel 9:26). Contrary to popular expectations in apocalyptic circles of the time, war and catastrophe were not sure signs of the end of the world. The end of history is to be associated with the coming of the Son of Man in glory which will occur only at the collapse of the cosmos, which will be unmistakable.

- The intention of the text is therefore to call the followers of Jesus to hope for the coming of the Son of Man. That hope will sustain Christians undergoing persecution and sustain them to endure to the end.” – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

The thirteenth chapter of Mark is commonly called the “Little Apocalypse,” as it displays several characteristics of apocalyptic thought. Its symbolism is drawn from apocalyptic passages in the Old Testament, especially the book of Daniel; it also shares characteristics of the New Testament book of Revelation, which uses similar language to speak of the end times and the fulfillment of God’s salvific will for God’s people. As Jesus approached his “hour” of suffering and death on the Cross, he warns his disciples that as his followers they will also be called upon to endure

suffering and persecution for the sake of the Gospel message they will be sent forth to proclaim:

- “As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you will say, but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it is not you who speaks, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” – 13:9-13.

One would think that Jesus’ warnings to his disciples about misinterpreting the meaning of current events and to beware of false prophets who seek to lead them astray, these followers still seem to be focused on signs of the arrival of their sought-after destination of the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in their lifetimes. Luke reports in his Acts of the Apostles that after his death and resurrection and in the moments before his ascension, these same disciples as the Risen Christ “*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). In a sense, they are asking Jesus “are we there yet?” Is this finally the moment, Lord, when our journey has ended, when we have reached our destination, when everything you have promised and that we have expected will be fulfilled?

The answer of our Risen Lord is in two parts. First, he announces to his impatient disciples that “*it is not for you to know the times and periods that the Father has set by his own authority*” (1:7). Jesus had previously taught his disciples in the Lord’s Prayer to pray “*thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches that this means that “*God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us.*”

- “Whenever God breaks and hinders every evil scheme and will – as are present in the will of the devil, the world, and our flesh – that would not allow us to hallow God’s name and would prevent the coming of his kingdom, and instead whenever God strengthens us and us steadfast in his word and in faith until the end of our lives. This is God’s gracious and good will.”

While Jesus cautions his disciples about speculating on the end of history that is solely an aspect of God’s sovereign will, he does commission them in the task that

they are to perform until that day when our Lord returns in glory “*to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end*” (Nicene Creed): “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (1:8). Instead of spending their time and energy speculating on that which solely belongs to God, the disciples and the apostolic church of every generation is called to focus on sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with all persons, so that the Will of God that “*everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*” (John 3:16) might be accomplished.

- “But beneath Mark’s timetable, one may perceive a deeper meaning in his apocalyptic conviction: namely, what has begun in Jesus will triumph, despite the tumult and resistance of this world … And as darkness falls, Marks commands us, ‘Be alert! Stay awake! Watch!’” – Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

As we look at the current situation of the world in which we live, we may find ourselves joining with the disciples in wondering if we are experiencing signs of the *Parousia*, the end of the world as we know it and the coming of our Lord in his promised glory. We are experiencing increasingly violent storms, floods, famines, hurricanes, and tornadoes that are bringing destruction to both physical structures and the social lives of those who endure the aftermath of such natural disasters. We hear news of wars and rumours of wars all around us, and the increasing fear and uncertainty about the future of our world is given rise to authoritarian forces who promise quick fixes to complex situations, assigning blame to certain persons or groups who are claimed to be responsible for our current circumstances. Many long for a return to the “halcyon days” of old, nostalgic for a time when everything seemed better than our lives are today. Many live in fear of what the future will hold for their children and grandchildren, in some cases wondering if we have reached the “point of no return” for our world and for humanity.

There are indeed many reasons for us to be concerned with many situations that are happening both here at home and around the world; but as Christians, we must heed Jesus’ warning to beware of some who will misinterpret what is happening around us as a means of leading us astray. Indeed, it is the work of Satan to tempt us to stray from the path of discipleship to our Lord Jesus Christ and to follow paths that appear to hold promise of a better future but lead us instead into a place of darkness and despair. This is why we gather to celebrate a baptism or to affirm our own baptismal promises, we renounce the devil and all his empty promises as well as “*the ways of sin that draw you from God*” (ELW Holy Baptism). We are called to be concerned

about the present state of our world and to work to make conditions better for all people, but we are not to look at what is happening for signs of the end of our journey and the fulfillment of God's Will. Our journey will end in God's good time; in the meantime, our call as God's people is clear: "*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve; and to spread God's liberating word.*" (ELW Hymn 729).

- "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" That is what we shall do. When we forget who we are, our Lord reminds us: we are the people who live by the grace of God alone, by trusting in God's providence and by remembering that we are more, far more, than what we consume or wear or where we live. We may care for ourselves and we may care for others, but it is God who cares for us all, and none of us is home yet." – Barbara Brown Taylor.

*"Are we there yet?"*

We may have put aside our childish impatience when we are on a journey or awaiting the fulfillment of a desired event; but we may still find ourselves wondering when our journey as God's disciples will end in our Lord's return. Jesus' warning to his first disciples is warning to disciples of every generation: beware that we are not led astray by those who would use the signs of the times as a means of tempting us away from trusting in the Lord and following paths that will lead us away from God. While we may not be there yet, we know that the day will surely come when our Lord will gather us together in our eternal home, where as surely as goodness and mercy will follow us throughout our journey in this life, we will one day be "there" when our Lord gathers us together so that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Amen.