

Sermon Text for November 14, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Daniel 12:1-4, Mark 13:1-8 *“Predicting the times ahead of us”*

Less than two weeks ago hundreds of people gathered on the grassy knoll in Dallas, the same place where Leo and Mark and I were a few months ago, but the people gathered there last week were there waiting for the return of JFK Jr. Hundreds of people who were gathered there were there because someone had told them that he was going to show up and put someone in political power and this mess in which we find ourselves would be over.

Now, I don't normally give much time in my sermons to people who are delusional, but a couple of things caught my attention. The first was that the vast majority of these people self-identify as Christian, as believers and disciples of Jesus Christ. The second thing is that I have noticed over this pandemic a heightened desire for people in the mainstream, not those who are always on the fringes and are always making things up and showing up on rooftops waiting for Martians to take them how, I am noticing that more and more normal people are following those who are predicting the future, those who in the name of Jesus call themselves prophets.

This chapter in Mark is a happy hunting ground for people fascinated by the end of the world. It is called the little apocalypse. Both of the passages that we are going to read today are passages that for over these past 2,000 years have been used by people to attempt to predict the future by identifying what is happening in our world today and then make the claim that we are living exactly in those time that the Bible has said we would, and so as a result show up on the grassy knoll, or show up at the Capitol building, or show up on the streets. And more often than not these claims are matched with a call to violence, something which we know Jesus told Peter when he was arrested, put your sword back in your sheath.

In my ministry I have never seen more people like you and me fall for the false prophets that are circulating in our world today. How do we approach our own understanding of prophecy, our own understanding of relating to those who see modern prophecies as requiring us to act in a way that is not prescribed by Scripture and certainly runs completely contrary to Jesus' command to love God and love neighbor. Providentially we have been studying the gift of prophecy in our young adult Sunday School class and phrase that I like that we came up with is that prophecy is prescriptive, not predictive.

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So what do we mean when we say that prophecy is prescriptive, not predictive. That takes us to our first reading in Daniel. We know that Daniel and the Hebrew people were facing an extremely difficult reality when this was written. Daniel was not trying to tell the people a predictive statement that tomorrow Michael will come and lead you to victory. Rather, he gives his people hope that there will come a day when you will be raised from the dead, hope is not far off. Like in the old spiritual: My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall.

Daniel is not saying this will happen tomorrow, but he is providing a prescription on what we need to do as a result of this promise of hope. Look at vs.3, we are called to be wise, to lead people to righteousness. This is prescriptive, lead people closer to God as you find yourself in a time when you wish and hope for a change in the present. This is really why we are seeing what we are seeing today with this increase of belief in prophecy from mainline folks, and specifically prophecy that is laced with political and violent directives.

Look at vs.4 where Daniel speaks about the increase of evil as an earmark for the time in which they were finding themselves. Are we not told by many that we find ourselves in a time where evil is increasing exponentially? You say it yourselves, I can't watch the news anymore, it is all negative. The sense that evil is increasing translates to an immediate threat to our way of life, which then leads us to believe that we have to do something to protect and keep our way of life. People are looking to destroy our way of life. Have you heard that before? Both sides of the aisle are saying that about each other.

Let's answer that question of is evil increasing? Daniel says that it will. If I were to give a poll today in church I would guess that a vast majority of you would say that evil is increasing. But how quickly we forget the difficulties of the past as we focus on our current hardships. We just celebrated this week veteran's day, thank you for your service. But how quickly we have forgotten that within many of our lifetime the world was at war, literal war. Can you honestly say that evil has increased today over and against when the world was at war? Let's go back a few hundred years when even here in Strasburg we had slaves that were owned by residents, can we honestly say that evil has increased from then?

We think evil has increased and so we create a narrative of extremes which places many people in a position where they feel like they have no alternative but to look for answers elsewhere, other than what Scripture tells us. So why is this happening now in a way that I have never seen before, and it is matched with people who are more than willing to provide predictions which will motive people who just want to maintain things the way they are or the way they were, which translates into a benefit for them? I think we find an answer to that question in Mark. Let's turn there.

Last week Jesus spoke to his disciples in the temple against the religious leaders who were failing in their leadership and we challenged ourselves to identifying where in our lives do we pursue passionately that which we consider our security. Today, they leave the temple, the icon of Jewish nationalism and Jewish religious life, basically there was nothing more significant in the life of a Jew than the temple. A disciple comments on the beauty and the size of it, basically commenting to Jesus, we done pretty good with this temple, right? And Jesus says, whatever, it is going to be thrown down soon. Now, that is predictive, Jesus can do that.

Once they leave the temple they cross the Kidron valley and go to their favorite shady hang out spot, the Mount of Olives, they spent a lot of time there. While there the executive committee of the disciples approaches Jesus and asks him, so that whole temple statement, when is that going to happen and can you tell us what signs, what will be happening in the world when that is about to happen so that we can be ready. We hear you, now we just want to be ready.

The first response from Jesus to his disciples in their request to be able to know the future, in order to be told the signs, is seen in vs.5, beware. You see, they wanted the change that Jesus was promising. They wanted to be a part of what Jesus was teaching. They did not want their current life, so in some ways they are on the opposite side of what we are seeing today. Those who are following modern day prophets want things the way they used to be. Jesus' disciples wanted things completely different, but the similarity lies in the fact that they both wanted a present situation in which their life would be better, where they were in the majority, and where they would be able to have the power that had eluded them up to now.

Jesus follow that with a don't let people lead you astray. Because the historically favorite way for people to lead you astray, and this has been happening for thousands of years, is by trying to predict the future. If you are unhappy with your present then there is a temptation to gravitate towards a prophecy that predicts a different future than what you are presently living, because you are unhappy with your present. Why would you waste your time with prophecy that sees you defeated and without power when there are plenty of people who will prophesy that the person you want in power will be in power. I'll take that one if I can choose. I'll take the prophecy that predicts a brighter future for me.

Jesus tells his disciples that it isn't just going to be a couple of folks, but many will come. He tells his disciples not to listen to those who are predictive because they will then provide a prescription which includes actions that are not biblical and will lead to violence and will lead to hating your neighbor because you are only looking out for yourself or your nation which is often at the expense of individuals and nations around you. That is not the way of Christ, that is the way of evil.

What we find in Scripture with the Old Testament prophets was that those who spoke on behalf of God, Isaiah, Jeremiah, you name the prophet, rarely spoke in a way that predicted victory for the Israelites. Rather, they spoke in a way that demanded contrition and humility and as the prophet Micah states in 6:8 What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly. This is prescriptive and not predictive. The prophets, and certainly Jesus, always led us to a place where our actions would have to be wrapped in humility and often required sacrifices that we have to make. False prophets point us to benefits handed to us like a new government ruled by someone we want , even if they are dead.

If you look at vs.7 in Mark you will see that Jesus tells his disciples when these final times will come. He says simply, not yet. Many times in Scripture Jesus points to the end time as coming as a thief in the night. He tells his disciples that not even he knows when they will come. Even Daniel is told by God in vs.4 to keep the words of God secret. We have something in common with Jesus' disciples. The historical signs associated with the end of the world have occurred over and over and over again, but Jesus' coming is still in the future, not yet.

All predictions are met with Jesus' words, beware, take heed, careful. How do these modern day prophets of today think they know more than Jesus does? But a warning is also found in these Scriptures to those of us attached to institutions and who think we are safe within these walls of the institution. To those whose faith is institutionalized and does not have room for the Holy Spirit or for the second coming, this Scripture predicts the destruction of institutions and calls for hope in the coming of the Son of Man. We cannot be too comfortable in our status quo. Or, as Jesus states, it will be thrown down.