

My First Apocalypse

Mark 13:24-37

First Sunday in Advent, November 29, 2020

Aledo UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ “But in those days, following that distress,

““the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light;

²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,

and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’^[a]

²⁶ “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸ “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it^[a] is near, right at the door. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert!^[a] You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”

Sermon, “My First Apocalypse”

My life changed forever on Sunday evening, June 11, 1972. It was the summer after my sophomore year at James Madison High School on Milwaukee’s northwest side. Some friends of mine had been going to a church called Milwaukee Gospel Tabernacle and they invited me to join them for the evening service. I was happy to go, even though I had never been to a “tabernacle” before.

We arrived at MGT (as we called it) in plenty of time to find a seat up front on the second row. I found out later that was my friends’ regular pew. Except it wasn’t a pew. The church or tabernacle or whatever it was featured theater-style seating—individual wooden chairs that were bolted to the floor. They had curved backs and seats that folded down when you sat in them and folded back up when you got up. I had never seen anything like that in a Lutheran church.

Everything about that experience was new to me. Although I had attended Peace Lutheran Church regularly and had been confirmed there, I’d never sat so close to the front of the church before. And I’d never gone to church on a Sunday *evening* either. And I’d never been to a church that didn’t have pews.

Nonetheless, the seating style was appropriate because that night’s service featured a movie, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which was based on the book of the same name. The film was presented documentary-style, complete with newsreel footage and narrated by the book’s author, Hal Lindsay.

If you've come across any materials in the "Left Behind" series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, then you've come across the dispensationalist theology presented by Hal Lindsay in *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

I sat there absolutely transfixed as Hal Lindsay described how Bible prophecy was being fulfilled. He described how the nation of Israel had been reestablished in 1948 in fulfillment of prophecy. He described how the various nations of the world were playing into God's timetable for what he called "The Great Tribulation"—which he said would be a global *War of the Worlds*. Then he went on to describe how Christ would claim believers as his own in something he called the "rapture of the church" which was a prelude to Christ's Second Coming whereupon he would establish peace on the earth and the beginning of his eternal reign.

I had always believed in Jesus; I'd professed as much as part of my confirmation vows. But what I experienced that night was different. For the first time in my life I realized that God was active in the world. For the first time in my life I realized that God really cared about the world. And for the first time in my life I realized that *I* really mattered to God. I realized that God loved me and wanted me for his own. It was my first apocalypse.

Now, that takes some explaining. Thanks to the likes of Hal Lindsay and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and the like, we tend to think of apocalypse in terms of massive violence and death tolls climbing into the hundreds of thousands. Movies such as *Apocalypse Now* only reinforce our association of apocalypse with death and destruction so that we tend to think of apocalypse in terms of earthquakes and tsunamis and nuclear explosions and divine judgment. But those things aren't really at the heart of what an apocalypse is actually all about.

The word *apocalypse* comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis* which simply means *to unveil*. It is closely related to the Latin word *revelatio* from which we get our English word *revelation*. Both *apokalupsis* and *revelatio* mean "to reveal or to expose to sight" and, metaphorically, to disclose to the mind truth which had otherwise been unknown.

On June 11, 1972 I was introduced to the Apocalypse: I was introduced to Hal Lindsay's theological treatise on the Great Tribulation and the Second Coming of Christ. But something else happened: I also had my first apocalypse. For the first time in my life the love of God through Jesus Christ was truly *unveiled* to me.

Prior to that day, I had known that God loved me, but my understanding of that love was of a God who was remote and distant from me. I didn't really think that I mattered at all to God. But when I had my first apocalypse, I came to the startling revelation that God loved me personally and intimately and wanted to be an important part of my life. If we could've sung today, we likely would've sung the Advent chorus, "Emmanuel, Emmanuel, God with us, *revealed* in us."

Speaking of Advent, every year the Revised Common Lectionary strives to help us prepare for the celebration of the First Coming of Christ by suggesting scriptures about the Second Coming of Christ. And so today, we were "treated" to a reading from Mark's "Little Apocalypse."

However, I would like to suggest to you that the best example of an apocalypse is not in Mark chapter 13; it's not even in the Book of Revelation; rather, the best example of an apocalypse may be in Acts chapter nine. There, a Pharisee named Saul was in the midst of a murderous campaign to wipe out a brand new sect that was polluting the purity of Judaism. That sect was known as "the Way;" it would later become known as Christianity.

Saul—who would later adopt the Greek name Paul to enhance his ministry with the Gentiles—had learned that there were a number of Christians living in Damascus—wouldn't you like to experience Damascus? Anyway, Paul obtained permission from his Jewish authorities to go and have those Christians arrested and perhaps even put to death. We pick up the story in Acts 9:3—

³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁶ “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do...”

⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything (Acts 9:3-6, 8-9).

Meanwhile in Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias who was given a vision from God to go and pray with Saul. Although Ananias was suspicious, he nonetheless obeyed.

¹⁷ (So) Ananias went to the house (where Saul was staying) and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength (Acts 9:17-19).

The key phrase there is, “something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes and he could see again.” It would seem as though Paul’s mask was over his eyes rather than his mouth and nose. And then, Paul was de-masked in Damascus, thanks to the ministry of Ananias. In other words, the love of God through Jesus Christ was *unveiled* to him and Saul had his first apocalypse.

I know it seems rather odd to talk about the Second Coming of Christ and the apocalypse when our thoughts are turning toward Christmas. But when you come right down to it, the simplest way to understand Christmas is to realize that Christmas is an apocalypse: Christmas is the revelation of God’s love for humanity:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Christmas is the *unveiling*—the *apocalypse*—of God’s love for the world and the beginning of his plan for our salvation:

- God’s love was revealed through the womb of a peasant woman from Nazareth.
- God’s love was revealed in during a census-taking in Bethlehem.
- God’s love was revealed to lowly shepherds on a hillside near Bethlehem who could think of nothing else but to go to Bethlehem and see the love of God revealed in a tiny baby.
- God’s love was revealed to Eastern astrologers who could think of nothing else but to follow a star all the way to Bethlehem where they would discover the love of God revealed in human flesh.

And each of them—Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men—had their first apocalypse when the love of God was revealed to them.

Have you had your apocalypse? Has the love of God through Jesus Christ been revealed to you? Have you come face to face with the fact that God loves you personally and intimately and that he wants to live within you so that he can be your Emmanuel—God with *you*?

That’s what Christmas is all about:

- Christmas is not about presents; but it is about the gift of God’s salvation.
- Christmas is not about children; but it is about having childlike faith in Jesus Christ.
- Christmas is not about family; but it is about being adopted into the family of God.

Christmas is about having your very own apocalypse—it’s about having God’s love poured out into your heart (Romans 5:5).