**“When Will This Be?”** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, November 14, 2021

**1 Samuel 2:1–5**

1Hannah prayed and said, “My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

2 “There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 3 Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. 5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.”

**Mark 13:1–10**

1 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” 2Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” 5Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. 6Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. 7When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. . .

9 “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. 10And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.” 

People in Jesus’ day were familiar with the idea of prophets who saw visions and made pronouncements meant to instruct people to maintain their spiritual vigor and loyalty. The lengthy prophecy in Mark 13—I’ve only included about a quarter of the whole passage here—also resembles some written works that were available at that time, Jewish apocalypses.

This prophecy is quite complicated and unclear. It is like a message in a bottle from another age, and we’re trying to figure out what it means. It is understandable that Christians have had a hard time understanding it. In fact, I think it is likely that Mark himself, or whoever handed on Mark’s gospel, partially misunderstood the content. It seems that the passage blends two different future events, possibly from two different speeches of Jesus, and something from a written document as well. One speech, the dominant one, is a prophecy of events that will happen within the lifetimes of most of Jesus’ hearers. It is the destruction of the temple that he is foretelling. This is clear in the opening verses when he says that the stones of the temple will be toppled over. That actually occurred in 70 a.d., during the Jewish Revolt against Rome, forty or forty-one years after the speech of Jesus.

The material near the end of what I’ve quoted from Mark is also near in time to Jesus’ day, since it talks about believers being persecuted, beaten in synagogues and taken before governors. This indeed started happening to Jesus’ followers even before the fall of Jerusalem.

I think some other parts of this prophecy concern a more distant future, such as “the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations” (13:10). And some things could apply to almost any age, such as “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’” (13:6). We still have people who claim to be Jesus in the flesh. The Reverend Sun Myung Moon, for instance, the founder of the so-called Moonies, who died in 2012, claimed to be the Second Coming of Christ. But there were also pretenders in earlier centuries. And as regards “wars and rumors of wars,” which age has been free of those? Our age is certainly not devoid of those, and many of our veterans have fought in those wars. We salute their fortitude and resilience. We who did not fight cannot imagine what they experienced.

It seems that at some time, Jesus may have said something about the far distant future, and he certainly *did* say something about his future return to earth. As for the great conflict that this chapter presents, it is not clear whether this is supposed to be in the far future, or at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. It is clear that he spoke specifically about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple; he warned his followers that it would be terrible, and that “someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat” (13:16). Many Christian apocalypticists believe the events of Mark 13 foretell a time of world-wide conflict that is to happen in our lifetimes, followed by the Second Coming and Judgment Day, but this seems to arise less out of the text and more out of their desire to see certain people punished and their own hopes vindicated.

There is a self-righteous violent-mindedness in much of what Christian apocalypticists say. They want to see some people get crushed, and they inscribe what they imagine upon the text. Jesus, however, tended to give practical and down-to-earth warnings rather than highly abstract or distant future prophecies. Jesus does not want us to be filled with dread or fear or lust for revenge, nor to drift into cynicism about humanity. We make our own future. One thing Jesus says here is “Do not be alarmed” (13:7), but the rest of the chapter is, frankly, fairly alarming, and does not sound like the rest of Jesus’ teaching. Scholars have often noted that Mark’s narrative would flow smoothly from the end of chapter 12 to the beginning of chapter 14, without chapter 13 at all. At the end of 12 he is talking with his disciples about moral principles and praising a humble widow, then in 14 he is invited to a dinner at the house of a prominent Pharisee, and he gives a moral lesson there, defending a woman by saying “let her alone; why do you trouble her?” (14:6). Mark 13 looks like a separate work inserted into the text (see Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 122), though this cannot be proven. To me, it looks like a blending of a Jewish apocalyptic text with some actual sayings of Jesus about the future.

This week, if we are looking for an upbeat message, we might have to look at the Old Testament passage. This is Hannah’s hymn of praise after her barrenness was finally eliminated, and she bore the son whom she named Samuel. The hymn and the story both speak of reversal: the reversal of Hannah’s barrenness, the reversal of her reputation in the eyes of those who had mocked her, reversal for the mighty, whose bows will be broken, reversal for the feeble, who will “gird on strength” (1 Sam 2:4), reversal for the hungry, and a shaming reversal for the one who had many children but is now forlorn (2:5). This last one probably refers to her husband’s other wife, who had taunted her regarding her barrenness. Now Hannah gets to be the mother of the one who will become the leading prophet in Israel.

It is a story of reversal and fulfillment, similar to other such stories, like John the Baptizer’s mother, Elizabeth, who was of a certain age and had also remained barren, but then was promised a child (Luke 1:7, 24). The story of Elizabeth and Mary has the infant John leaping in the womb when he hears Mary’s voice, and Mary then pronouncing a hymn that speaks of reversal, the hungry being filled while the rich are sent away empty (1:53).

Joyful reversal is a common theme in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus said “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt 19:30). Salvation itself is a kind of reversal of physical vulnerability, age, and death. Salvation is spiritual victory over the limitations of time and space. God’s love and mercy will be seen to triumph.

The culmination of the apocalyptic chapter Mark 13 is when he says “then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” (Mark 13:26), where he quotes Daniel 7:13, the passage that goes on to speak of “one like a Son of Man” being given “everlasting dominion that shall not pass away” (Dan 7:14). This is the part of Mark 13 where Jesus is referring to his far-future Second Coming, coming in power, not as a helpless babe. It seems clear that Mark has either combined parts of two different speeches of Jesus, or strung together parts of a speech that are referring to different events, without making it clear that these are different events. He has clearly not returned upon the clouds yet, but the Jerusalem temple has indeed been thrown over, and early Christians were brought before magistrates and accused. Early Christians needed the encouraging message of Jesus’ *eventual* vindication and endowment with dominion. They did not realize how far separated that would be, in time, from the destruction of the temple. They thought it was all coming, very soon.

Christians eventually had to adapt to the realization that Jesus was probably not returning in their lifetimes. But, inspired by Jesus’ example, they became more involved in their culture. Hospitals were founded. Services for feeding the poor were organized. Details of theology, such as the nature of the Trinity and different ways of reading the Bible, became subject matter for theological writing. These and other ministries brought the spirit of hope into our world, hope that was not based on apocalyptic revenge.

So the goal is balance: too much apocalyptic expectation makes one panicy, cynical, and judgmental, wanting to see others punished; while too worldly a view can lead to passive conformity and fatalism. Hope for justice is certainly acceptable, wanting to see some of the promised reversals, and hoping for the final day of vindication, when Christ will gain dominion.

Right now we live in the between-times, when good and evil coexist, and we need to keep making the right decisions. Our decisionmaking leads to soul growth, and that is our purpose down here on earth: to get the soul growing, like a plant that grows, “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (Mark 4:28). It will not usually be sudden and spectacular growth that we will see, but gradual, stage by stage growth. We will make mistakes, but we need not fear that God is vengeful. Our brother in arms, Jesus, walks with us every day and is ready to hear our hopes and prayers.

Rejoice and believe that there will be reversals and triumphs. God’s will certainly *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven.