

“Tell Us, When?” (Mark 13:1-13)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Signs are important. They provide directions and can even save your life if you pay attention to them. It is, however, also important that we *interpret* them properly. Caltrans developed a yellow freeway sign that depicts a man and a woman running across the freeway, the woman is pulling along a little girl with pigtails. The sign was intended to warn drivers of illegal immigrants trying to cross the interstate. The signs were generated after more than 100 illegal immigrants were hit by oncoming vehicles and killed. The sign doesn't have any words on it. It is merely a sign with the image of a family running. It avoids words so as to deal with the language barrier. Spanish-only or English-only speakers would be able to interpret the sign. The problem, however, is in the interpretation of the sign. Was this sign actually communicating a warning to drivers? Or was the sign communicating an invitation to those who want to cross? Is the sign communicating that this is a location where running across is permissible? A whole new problem has developed regarding this sign.

In our gospel this morning the Lord predicted Jerusalem's destruction: "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." (v 2) The Lord's prediction came to fruition in A.D. 70. Josephus describes the destruction in great detail -- and many of the details are horrifying -- but he concludes his description with the fact that "Caesar ordered the entire city and the temple smashed to the ground." (Maier, trans., *Josephus: The Essential Writings*, 369)

The disciples who heard about the Lord's terrifying prediction were most likely stunned by it and it is understandable that they would want to know about the sign leading up to this. Some of them asked the Lord as recorded at verse 4: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" This was their question, but we know from a parallel passage in Matthew 24:3 that the disciples were asking not only about the sign for the end of Jerusalem, but also about the sign of the end of the world. Matthew 24:3 records: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" As a result, we know that in these texts we are dealing with two things:

1. The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.
2. The end of the world that is still to come.

Our Lord Jesus then goes on to discuss not a single sign, but many signs. And these signs are not only applicable to what the disciples in the text -- in the first-century -- would experience, but appear applicable to what is also experienced before the end of the world. From the list in our gospel from St. Mark, we have these signs:

1. False Christs will appear.
2. Wars and rumors of wars.
3. Nation rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.
4. Earthquakes in various places.
5. Famines.
6. The disciples would experience persecution from the outside (the world would come against them).
7. The disciples would experience persecution from the inside (even some of their own family members would betray them).
8. The followers of Christ will be hated by all on account of the name of Christ.
9. They who would remain faithful will be saved.

But the clearest statement of the end is related to verse 10 which says, "And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations." The parallel in Matthew 24:14 is the concluding sign on the list and simply states: "And the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Take note of this very important point: the disciples wanted to know "when?" Sinful nature wants to live wrongly. We are tempted every single day to live wrongly and to focus on "when?" That way, the evil one leads us astray from "today." Instead of praying today, helping those in need today; instead of sharing the gospel today, instead of living in this moment that we have as we should and as Scripture teaches: "this is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24); "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor. 6:2); "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." (Hebrews 3:7; 3:15; and 4:7); "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious about itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matthew 6:34), instead of living this way, our sinful flesh and the evil one tries to move us beyond today. And the moment we take on the anxiety of the future, we lose our peace today. Then we are too anxious to fill our hearts with the Word of Christ, when instead our minds are filled with the worries about tomorrow.

So there are many times when we think we want to know; when our curiosity is piqued and when we want to know *when*. *When will the end come?* The question is hotly pursued by many people and it's a great way to get yourself into trouble and to distract yourself from the faith. On the internet there is actually something called "the rapture index" which tries to rate the severity of the signs already mentioned in this sermon. When the severity of these signs seem very high, then a percentage is presented indicating the likelihood that today is the last day. This is a very popular website that has been going on for years and is obviously one that many people pay attention to. It is an open-invitation to dabbling with a question that Jesus

Himself chose not to answer. It was the Lord's way of saying, "don't worry about it; it's none of your business."

And yet He *does* answer the disciples' question from the standpoint of giving *many* signs. This was of course quite intentional. With this information, the process is easy: go down the list. Have there been false Christs? Yes indeed! Have there been wars and nations rising against nations? But of course! We see this before our eyes on the news almost every day! Earthquakes? They alarm us as they are all around. Famines? Even in this technologically advanced age, this remains a fundamental plight on our planet. God's people persecuted? It is a painful reality. Is the Gospel being proclaimed throughout the world? As a matter of fact, yes it is. So what does this tell us? Our Lord clearly wanted us to know that we are living in the end times. This is something every Christian should just know.

So our Lord – in His great love and wisdom – wants us to know this:

- 1) The signs are all around us and we are indeed living in the end times.
- 2) Still, we do not know; He will not tell us exactly when.

Is He being cruel? Much to the contrary, He is being extraordinarily loving. It's been several years now since the movie Titanic came out. It is one of the all-time highest-grossing movies. There is one scene that has particularly stuck with me for whatever reason. The ship is sinking. Almost everyone on board is panicking, but there is a quiet and peaceful scene going on, on one of the lower decks. A loving mother chooses to spend her time comforting her children, tucking them into bed and keeping her love before the eyes of her children. She refused to join the panic. She insisted to treat that night as any other. This was her way of facing the end. I found it to be most profound.

The signs are given to you and me for one reason: The Lord is saying that the end – either our personal end or yes, perhaps even the very end of the age is at hand – so what should we do? His call to us is simple: repent. Live in your faith Christians. Hold to Jesus. Turn from sin and turn towards your Savior Christ!

The last and greatest sign of the gospel being preached to the whole world is not given so that we would try to gauge and measure it so as to predict the last day, but so as to remind us as to what the constant occupation of the people of God is all about. We are the people of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Every day the good news is the most important news – not about wars, not about earthquakes (these will always be in this world and yes, we should view these as our call to pray and our call to serve those in need) – but the news that is to stick in our souls is not the news of terror; not the news for anxiety, but the news of peace, the news of consolation, and the news of eternal life. The news that leads us to know that we don't have to worry about the end, because the Lord Jesus who will come at the end is already constantly

coming to us through His Word and through His Holy Sacrament. It is His way of training us for the last day by viewing this day as the most important day because we know that the Lord of glory is already with us today!

We are on the inside of God's perfect plan for protecting us and shielding us from the terrors of the world. See Christ comes now. You are not called to worry about "when" in the future, but rather to be full of joy for the "now" of the moment. This time, this day, this moment Jesus comes to you. You will be ready for the end, because you've been on the receiving end of Jesus coming to you over and over again; He comes as the One who took your sin upon Himself and covered it with His blood; He comes as the One who has conquered death for you by rising from the grave; He comes as the One who gives you the Kingdom which is quite simply impervious to the end. It can't end.

This is how and this is why dear Christians that at the very end of our gospel in Mark 13 the Lord is recorded as saying, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." Your reception of Jesus continuously coming to you is what causes you to endure. You know the saying applied to physical conditioning or to the mastery of certain skills: "use it or lose it." Christ has placed you into the rhythm of constant "use" of the Word and Sacraments. This is how He protects you. By His grace, you'll never lose it. Your faith will endure.

So to the question, "Tell Us, When?" Let us say, "Today!" This day the Lord has come to me; this day the Lord has saved me! This day my sins are forgiven! I'm ready for anything.