

So It Goes

In the 1840's there was an outbreak of what theologians call "over-realized eschatology." There were a lot of reasons for this, especially in this country, the Civil War was brewing. Globally, there were questions about human dignity and the institution of slavery. The industrial revolution was rumbling on the horizon, and the fruit of the Enlightenment was ripening into scientific advances. Surely, in the minds of some devoted religious folk like Baptist preacher William Miller, there was ample evidence that God was just about to call this game and bust in like the Sheriff at a teenage keg party and put an end to all this wickedness. Miller did some fancy math and used all sorts of arcane Bible stuff involving a certain version of the Jewish Lunar Calendar, and he came up with a day, April 18, 1844, when Jesus was going to come back and either the Kingdom would come here, or those who believed would be taken there. In April nothing happened, but Miller was not easily dissuaded, so he simply re-did some of his calculations, figuring that it was just his arithmetic, not his theology, that was in the wrong, and revised the date of Christ's return for October of 1844. When that second date also passed entirely Jesus-less, the Millerites, of whom there were many, simply began to refer to 1844 as, and I kid you not, "The Great Disappointment."

Miller himself died in 1849, still not having seen the return of Christ, at least not in the way he expected. His followers kept on keeping on though and to this day remain with us as the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and they're still waiting for Jesus to return. The 1840's also were the real beginnings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, aka the Mormons and really the advent of that charming idea that has made Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins very wealthy men: The Rapture. The point of all this is that, in times of strife and uncertainty, people tend to think the world is going to end, in fact they may even root for it to end, because they think that they are surely "the chosen" or the "enlightened" or the faithful remnant or something like that. What it really requires though, is a rather thorough ignorance of, or at least indifference to, what Jesus actually said and how he actually tried to prepare his disciples.

Mark 13 could very easily be read through the lenses of Apocalyptic prophecy, if one was so inclined, it goes into persecutions, desolating sacrilege, the return of the Son of Man and the need for watchfulness, but pay attention here to how it starts: the disciples are impressed with the temple and the great buildings of Jerusalem, Jesus tells them not to get too attached, these things are going to be destroyed. Now that sounds to the disciples, and to many who came later, as the start of someone about to tell you that God is finally bringing the wood to all us wretched sinners, but later when a few of the disciples ask Jesus about this, it turns out that's not really what's going on at all.

As a matter of historical fact, several of the disciples would actually live to see what Jesus just predicted, the utter destruction of the Temple, in 70 CE, not by God, but by the Roman Empire. And it was actually because a group of Jewish Zealots had managed to stage a successful ouster of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. They rose up, killed the high priest in the Temple and ran the Gentile dogs out of the Holy City. But it was a classic example of winning the battle and losing the war, because Rome did not take kindly to being inconvenienced by a bunch of religious nuts, they came back with the gloves fully off and the Temple was completely destroyed, and has never been rebuilt.

This result was actually entirely predictable. I think Jesus had come to know it during his life, and that knowledge shaped how he taught and led his disciples, assiduously avoiding getting coopted by the various revolutionary movements and groups of zealots that infested Israel in those days. N.T. Wright speculates that Jesus, growing up in Nazareth as the son of a builder, may have actually been a witness

to the aftermath of a similar uprising in the city of Sepphoris. Anne Rice, in her fictional account of Jesus "lost years," imagines young Jesus and his father Joseph and his brothers walking past lines of crucified rebels on their way to rebuild the city after the Romans had "pacified" at rebellion there. Jesus may have grown up knowing what it looked like to defy Rome, and he may have come to see that such destruction was something like inevitable.

He is preparing his disciples for the chaos of a reality where such things happen, and trying to get them to see that the Kingdom of God that he is talking about, cannot and will not be damaged or diverted by such things. Jesus teachings about the Kingdom of God consistently tell us that looking for the big things is the wrong way. He consistently points us in the direction of the last and the least, he gives us parables about how the Kingdom is unexpected and often upside down. The Kingdom of God happens like yeast and seeds, like vines and wheat, it happens with children and widows, it happens with prodigals and sinners of all sorts. The Kingdom happens when people least expect it, that's why we need to be always watchful, because Jesus is going to come back a lot more often than William Miller or Harold Camping, or anyone else can quite bring themselves to imagine. Christ is going to show up in the midst of our lives and we are going to be the ones who show him to the world. That's what being a disciple is about; to be a witness to the Kingdom; to be a conductor of the Holy Spirit; a channel that the power of God flows through.

Sometimes I don't blame the apocalyptic prophets and the religious zealots who see wars and rumors of wars as a sign that the end is near. Cataclysms and disasters can sometimes make you really wish God would just come and sort it all out, but that does not appear to be a thing that Jesus ever promised us. He promised to be with us, he warned us that this kind of stuff was just always going to happen. Jesus consistently tries to get us to see that the things we fear the most, and the rumblings of history are far from being signs of the end, they are just the pangs of a world being born.

Think about the difference this makes in our lives. If, as they say, "The End is Near," why don't we just hole up and wait it out, like the doomsday preppers? Why are we building churches, when we should probably be building bomb shelters? How perverse is it for people who are rooted in the promise of the Kingdom of God to live in fear? How satanic is it for people who believe that God is love to keep trying to scare folks with warnings that we have just finally gone too far? Even Jesus at his most "apocalyptic" is still basically telling people to live in hope, despite whatever they might think is going on, it is not the end, in fact, it's barely the beginning, it's just the birth pangs. Live with that hope and see where it leads you. I promise, you will find it better than the alternative. The wars might be more than rumors and the disasters might be real, but none of it will stop what God is doing.