

The Gospel according to Lemony Snicket

November 14, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Mark 13:1-8

When I was in seminary, I discovered a new series of books. And no, these books were not biblical commentaries, or books about church history, or theology. They were, instead, the books that I read when I was *supposed to be* reading all these other things. They were titled *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket.

Now, I will say that the books are pretty predictable and formulaic, and once you have read the first few, you have pretty much read them all. But that didn't stop me from devouring all 13 of them.

These stories are about three children – Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire – whose parents die in a fire and who are placed in the custody of their murderous uncle, Count Olaf, who goes to great ends to attempt to steal their inheritance.

And at every possible juncture, the author warns the reader: Don't read these books. They're terrible. They're filled with nothing but doom and gloom. There's nothing happy or fun or feel-good in them.

Here's how the back of the first book – titled *The Bad Beginning* – reads:

Dear Reader,

I'm sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant. It tells an unhappy tale about three very unlucky children. Even though they are charming and clever, the Baudelaire siblings lead lives filled with misery and woe. From the very first page of this book when the children are at the beach and receive terrible news, continuing on through the entire story, disaster lurks at their heels. One might say they are magnets for misfortune.

In this short book alone, the three youngsters encounter a greedy and repulsive villain, itchy clothing, a disastrous fire, a plot to steal their fortune, and cold porridge for breakfast.

It is my sad duty to write down these unpleasant tales, but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing.

*With all due respect,
Lemony Snicket*

And then, then next 13 books are an exercise in witnessing the genius and the resilience of three children in the face of one disaster, after another, after another, after another.

I have to admit, that I really resisted preaching on today's scripture. In fact, I had to laugh a little bit – when I was about halfway through writing it, my computer crashed, and I jokingly told David that my computer doesn't like this scripture any more than I do. And when I told him that I am preaching on the Markan Apocalypse, David said, "Oh, yeah. I don't much like that one either."

So in my house it's unanimous. Not our favorite reading. But, sometimes God keeps drawing us back again and again to scriptures that we might not always *like* all that much, because there is something in them that we *need*.

So whether I need this message today, or some of you do, I trust that it is God's spirit leading because it is not exactly the passage that I myself would have chosen.

Today's passage is the beginning of what is known as Mark's "Little Apocalypse," and it reads a lot like the dust jacket from *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Jesus goes all Lemony Snicket on the disciples, talking about the temple crumbling, and wars and rumors of wars and nation fighting against nation and earthquakes and famine and itchy clothing and cold porridge. "Don't get comfortable," Jesus is telling his disciples, "because things are going to get worse before they get better." "Buckle up, and keep your seatbelts on for the duration of the flight, because things are about to get bumpy." And if you want to put down the book and read something happier instead, now is your chance because the way of the cross is not always going to be pleasant.

So to really "get" the impact of this passage, we need to understand a little bit about what was going on in the world when Mark's gospel was written.

Mark's gospel tells the story about Jesus's life and death and resurrection. But the story was not written *while* the events of Jesus' life were taking place. After Jesus died and rose again, some significant time passed before any of the gospel writers started to put pen to paper and write down what they remembered about Jesus and his life and his teachings. We think that probably Mark was the first gospel that was written, followed by Matthew, and then Luke, and then John.

And we think that Mark was probably written sometime around the year 70 AD – so about 35-40 years after Jesus had died.

And during that 35-40 years, a lot was happening in the world. If you will remember, during the time of Jesus, the Roman empire was in full swing, and the Jewish community was not at all happy about that. They had placed a lot of hope in the idea that Jesus was the promised Messiah, who had come to overthrow Rome, and restore Israel to a place of political independence and peace.

And of course, we know that that's *not* what happened, and that's not why Jesus came. And so when Jesus died, Rome was still in power, and the Jews in the region of Judea

(and especially in the city of Jerusalem) were not at all happy about their political climate.

About 10 years or so after Jesus died, Rome started to go through some pretty intense turmoil. The Roman emperor Tiberias died, and he was succeeded by the Emperor Caligula. Caligula was pretty much insane, and everybody knew it. He left a trail of carnage everywhere he went, and after just four years on the throne he was assassinated.

Caligula was succeeded by the emperor Claudius, who ruled for awhile, but then Claudius was murdered by his own wife, who fed him poisonous mushrooms. His wife then arranged for her son, Nero, to become the next emperor. But pretty much as soon as he took the throne, Nero had her, his own mother, executed.

Nero rules for about 10 years or so, and then decides that he wants to clear some space in the city of Rome to expand his castle complex. Because, evidently, his house wasn't big enough. And so, in order to clear the space that he wants, he sets fire to Rome – killing a good number of his own citizens. And because he can't take responsibility for much of anything (especially burning his own city), he blames the Jewish community for setting the fire. Then, he starts rounding up the Jews and having them publicly and systematically executed as "punishment" for their "crime."

This is an incredibly dark time for the Jewish and the Jewish Christian communities in and around Jerusalem. After a couple of years, Judea fights back and revolts against Rome – and these Jewish revolts go on for years. Eventually, Nero is assassinated, and an all-out Civil War breaks out in Rome to determine who is going to be the next emperor. They went through four of them in one year. While the Jewish community is breathing a sigh of relief that their oppressor is finally dead, a new emperor named Vespasian is finally identified. And in the year 70 AD, Vespasian sends forces into Jerusalem to re-take the city and to end the Jewish revolts, once and for all. He succeeds. And when he does, he burns the temple and destroys the city, either killing or sending into slavery tens of thousands of Jews.

And this is all happening right around the same year that Mark's gospel is written.

Christians and Jews are being burned at the stake for trumped-up crimes that they did not commit.

The emperors of their occupying country keep getting assassinated, or else murdered by their own family members.

Their beloved temple is looted and destroyed and burned to the ground, in much the same way that the first temple had been destroyed 500 years previously.

And their loved ones were being killed or sold left and right.

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

The very first people who ever read these words would have been those who had marveled at the beauty of their beloved temple one day, and were now standing, horrorstruck, in the ruins, wondering “how could this be happening? What does this mean? What is God doing? And why is it so hard?”

And then the story continues. Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives with four of his disciples: Peter, John, James, and Andrew. They don’t quite understand what Jesus is saying about the temple ending up as a pile of rubble – as far as they know, those stones are great and strong and powerful, and they are steady and secure. As far as they know, Jesus may still go beat up the emperor. They are still holding out some hope there – even though Jesus has already told them no. They are a little shaken by Jesus words, though, and they want to know more.

“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars,” Jesus says to them, “do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

So for Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, first hearing Jesus say these words, it would have been very easy for them to just shrug it all off. “Okay, yeah, whatever, Jesus. You’re sounding a little bit cranky and sleep-deprived. Can we get you some coffee? Would that help?”

But for the people first reading this story, less than 40 years later, they are standing in the remains of what used to be their temple. Wars, and rumors of wars? They were living that. Every moment of their lives. Nation rising against nation. And kingdom against kingdom. That was their whole existence. For them, Jesus isn’t just talking to the disciples about some nebulous time in the future when things will get dark. Jesus is talking to *them*. *Now*. For them, it is in-this-moment-*real*.

And what is Jesus saying to them?

First, there is the bad news: This is just the beginning. It’s going to get worse before it gets better. So brace yourselves. It’s not over yet. You are in for a long road.

But then, the good news: This is but the beginning *of birth pangs*. Labor pains. Pains that start small and that intensify and that can even get excruciating – because new life is coming into the world. Pains that signify the hope that is yet to come. Pains that may hurt – sometimes a lot – but that bring about something new and joyous.

All of a sudden, Jesus breaks from Lemony Snicket. And this is no longer a story of doom and gloom – a series of unfortunate events that we must endure just because life is hard sometimes. This is now a story of hope. A promise, that all of this struggle is leading somewhere, and that God is even now using it in a redemptive way.

“Just hold on,” Jesus is telling the first readers. “Bear down, and push through the pain. Breathe. It’s hard, and it hurts, but you will get through this. And once you do, there will be joy on the other side.

My friends, I think that it can probably go without saying that we in the 21st Century church are experiencing some birth pangs of our own. By the grace of God, our church building is not sitting as a pile of rubble, and we are not being burned at the stake because a crazy emperor has decided that his castle needs to be bigger. But that’s not to say that we haven’t had our own journey to walk through – that we are still walking through – and our own crosses to bear. There have been times – recently – when we have maybe been led to wonder if Lemony Snicket might be authoring the story of our lives. If it’s not overcrowded hospitals and racial tensions and political divisions, then it’s soaring gas prices and supply chain issues and mental health crises, all made worse by an infectious disease that has turned the whole world upside-down.

Wars and rumors of wars. Kingdoms fighting against kingdoms. Earthquakes and famine. Like the very first readers in that same year that Mark’s gospel was written, I’m thinking that maybe we can relate.

And here’s the promise: That God will use this struggle to birth something new. So may we take heart, trusting that when it feels like the world is falling to pieces, this is not the end – but merely the beginning. God has consistently shown us over thousands of years of history that out of the rubble always comes something new. A phoenix rising from the ashes. A butterfly emerging from the cocoon. An empty tomb where death no longer lives.

And may God give us the strength to carry our cross – trusting that the cross will lead us on the path to new life.

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