

Rumors of War
Mark 13:1-8
© Stacey Steck
Preached November 15, 2009 at San José, Costa Rica

My brother is not as gullible as he used to be. One day, when he was but a wee lad, some of his older and creepier neighborhood friends convinced him to join their secret club, and to undergo the official rite of passage. Based on the form of that initiation, perhaps club is too benign a word to describe that organization of little hoodlums. We are still thanking God that when he injected himself with a hypodermic needle full of water that he missed an artery. As the saying goes, with friends like that, who needs enemies? “Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say I am he! And they will lead many astray.’ ” No, my brother is not as gullible as he used to be, but he almost didn’t grow up to become any wiser.

My neighborhood’s little terrorists were not proclaiming themselves to be the Messiah, but they were offering something attractive, something with enough lure to entice a child to cause himself pain, even if he didn’t do it on the dare of the danger of the instrument. Those boys knew something about how to manipulate another person, and to lead him astray. They disguised their cruelty as community, their deviance as daring. For the sake of belonging to something that wasn’t even worth belonging to, my brother did something he wouldn’t even allow the doctor to do. How much more powerful then, is the lure of salvation from the lips of a so-

called Messiah? How much more powerful is the lure of freedom from military occupation, or poverty, or despair, or sickness? The predator knows full well what draws its prey out into the open.

The four disciples in tonight's story, Peter, James, John, and Andrew, were fortunate to have found themselves in the company of the real Messiah, but Jesus knows that not only they, but countless others just like them, countless other desperate farmers, fishermen, and shopkeepers in Jerusalem and Judea, could just have easily followed the next slick-tongued so-called Messiah promising freedom from the Romans, or eternal bliss, or whatever else they might have wanted or needed to hear, in exchange for a loyalty which would have asked them to do something needlessly painful or stupid or both. Indeed, many "messiahs" had come and gone, and many devoted followers had paid the price of their gullibility with their lives. And so, when these four disciples ask Jesus when they might expect the tyranny of Rome to come to an end, he cautions them to not be led astray by the predators who might seek their participation in the coming revolution, a revolution which led to the destruction of the Temple and the end of the Jewish way of life in Jerusalem. Wars will come and go, he tells them, but those wars do not signal God's appearance, only the appearance of violence in those who do not trust in God's final judgment. My way, he tells them throughout the rest of chapter 13, my way and the way you must follow, is to persevere, and to trust, and to be always alert for "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory," who will

“send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” If they wanted to go with the gang with the toughest initiation, this would be it, for how much harder is waiting and hoping than taking matters into your own hands?

There are some wonderful internal contrasts in this longer section of Mark that includes our reading for tonight, contrasts that tell us something about the politics of the day, and why Jesus’ caution against political predators might be in order. You will remember that the homeland of the Jews was being occupied by the Roman Empire, a regime that exacted high taxes and brutality in exchange for the right to exist. The Romans were no fools, allowing the citizenry to maintain the appearance of local autonomy, letting them have a limited self-rule, and their temple, and their festivals, and the like. The way they did this, of course, was to play the Jews off against each other, keeping in power those Jewish leaders who could keep the rest of the population docile, collaborators by another name. Indeed, we see later in the story the kind of weak minded people the Romans installed in positions of authority, people like Caiaphas, the High Priest, whose gullibility and self-interest led to Jesus being turned over to Pilate.

And so it is that in the passages immediately preceding our reading tonight that Jesus criticizes the scribes who make sure the institutions are well maintained during the occupation while allowing, or even participating in, the subjugation of its own citizens: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes,

and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." As Mark tells the story, we cannot help but see the disciples' gullibility when they see the Temple, the flagship institution of the collaborators, and say either admiringly or mockingly, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" It may be oversimplifying the situation just a bit, but for the sake of our discussion tonight, there were three types of people in Jerusalem in those days: the collaborators, the revolutionaries, and those to be contested over and persuaded by the other two types. The disciples were in that final group, wavering between seeing the Temple as a sign of autonomy, or a sign of treason. Either way, Jesus' seems to be saying, the temple is a trap. It is at best false glory, and at worst, an excuse for revolution. It will not survive, but the Son of Man will come in glory. Do not be so gullible, Jesus says, as to fall into either of those traps.

My brother is less gullible than he used to be. Are we? After two thousand years, and countless wars and rumors of war, are we any less likely to be taken in by false messiahs who would lead us astray to secure the ends of their own false choices? Or have we learned by now to more faithfully cling to the belief that the Son of Man "will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven?" and trust that God's judgment will be infinitely better than our own? As we listen again to Jesus' strong words on

this night we remember those who have been caught up in the violence of war, let us hope we are somewhat closer to the latter while acknowledging our persistent failures in the former, all the while seeking to take seriously Jesus' wisdom which still applies to we who remain in that category of "those to be contested over and persuaded by" either the purveyors of the violence of the status quo or the agitators of the violence of revolution.

"Beware that no one leads you astray." Among the contesting Christian perspectives on war are three primary contenders: First, those few who believe that God calls us to wage war to advance the interests of the Kingdom of God, that we are God's modern-day warriors; second, the substantially larger group that believes that war is never an option, a group frequently labeled pacifists; and finally, probably the largest group, those labeled the realists who believe that although war is to be avoided, it is justifiable in certain circumstances as a last resort for the defense of self or defenseless others. The debate among these last two groups, the pacifists and the realists, is seemingly endless, but clearly valuable when we take a look at what is at stake in the act of war.

In an honest and introspective Veterans' Day meditation on his blog, Abilene Christian University professor Richard Beck tackles his own feelings on violence and concludes that although he would like to be a pure pacifist, he recognizes very possible circumstances under which he would do violence against another person. "But," he writes poignantly and poetically, "I strongly believe

there should be pacifists. As I've argued before, I think communities of pacifism must and should exist. They are like monastic communities in this regard. The pacifist is an eschatological person. Pacifists show us the Day. They show us the grain of the universe. As such, pacifists don't fit in or function well in this Present Age. They will look irrational, paradoxical, inconsistent, immoral and irresponsible. Why? Because pacifists don't belong here. This is not their time. They come from Heaven. They are forerunners of the eschaton, [the end times].”

And as much as I think he is right about pacifists, he seems to be equating pacifism not with the absence of violence, but with the absence of action in defense of the defenseless, an inaccurate distinction that points to one of the ways we are led astray as followers, namely into limiting our options and our creativity for the poles of a position. When defending another person, there is always a range of options that falls between doing violence and doing nothing, if we are able to be prepared, to be alert to the possibilities. Let us not be led astray into thinking that the only options are violent intervention or self-absorbed isolation. Jesus did not call the disciples to passive introspection during the troubling times they would soon face, but to an active and ethical waiting that may have looked “irrational, paradoxical, inconsistent, immoral and irresponsible” when compared to either the scribes' self-obsession, or the zealots' plans for victory.

It is this sort of active and ethical waiting that gives rise to the remembering that constitutes the Remembrance Day and Veterans Day commemorations we

undertake, for we are also lead astray if we forget to remember, if we do not recall the sacrifice and horror, if we do not shock our systems every so often with difficult memories and stories, with images that remind us of the hidden costs of war, of the commitment of those at home as well as abroad, of the devastation to generations of humans and their environment. These commemorations haven't yet caused us to quell our need for war, but maybe someday they will. But in the meantime, may they serve to give us pause for both thanks and humility, and the opportunity to examine our motivations for violence of any kind, and especially war. You see, there is neither "self-interest" nor "national interest" with God. There is only the divine interest God takes in us and the human interest God calls us to have for one another. And if either of those look "irrational, paradoxical, inconsistent, immoral and irresponsible" so be it; we are in good company. May Christ's angels "gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven," and may we be counted among them. Amen.