

## Many will be led astray. What about me?

Mark 13:1-8

A Sermon for the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

This thirteenth chapter of Mark is about signs of the end. Mark 13:5: “Many will come in my name and say: ‘I am he!’ And they will lead many astray.” It goes on to say that there will be famine and earthquakes and all kinds of tribulation. Finally, the end comes. What can we say to this?

To begin with, let’s look briefly at three examples of end-times thinking in our country, although this sort of thing happens many other places, too.

First, the Seventh Day Adventists. In 1844 a man named Miller prophesied that the end was near. He led a host of followers to the tops of hills and mountains. They had sold their businesses, said good-bye to others, put on white robes because the end was coming. It didn’t, of course. They called that the Great Disappointment and one of the things they look at is this place in Jeremiah 26 where it says the Lord repented; he changed his mind. Although they understood that the end was coming on that day, it changed. Out of that expectation of the end came what we know as the Seventh Day Adventists. (The Branch Davidians [Waco, Texas, 1993] were a break-off group of the Branch Davidians.)

Second, the Scofield Bible and Dallas Seminary. Shortly before World War I, an American Bible student, Cyrus Schofield, produced a Bible with a commentary that claimed that between creation and the end there would be seven dispensations, seven distinct eras of God’s dealing with humanity, and that this is the key to interpreting the Bible.

Scofield’s Bible became popular and in the 1920’s led to the establishment of a evangelical seminary in Dallas, Texas, Dallas Seminary, which today is the largest seminary in the country (about 800 full-time students and 2,000 part-time students). At this seminary a major focus of study concerns questions like these: When will Jesus come again? Before the final tribulations? In the middle of the tribulations? Or after the tribulations? Dispensationalists don’t agree on the answer, but for them, this kind of thinking is key to understanding the Bible.

Third: Tim LaHaye and the *Left Behind* books. Tim LaHaye (1926-2016) was a Baptist evangelical preacher who wrote the *Left Behind* series (sixteen books), written as thrillers of Christians living through an end-time apocalypse. He sold about 80 million copies of the *Left Behind* books, and he also wrote about 60 non-fiction books on biblical prophecy.

What do we say about signs of the end time? Mark 13:32 helps us: “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

There are five things to say about signs of the end.

First, is apocalyptic imagery in the Bible some special divine code? The Gospel text for today is from Mark. There are parallels of this material in Matthew and Luke. But the New Testament book that is filled with apocalyptic material is Revelation. When you study it and see how it works, it becomes boring, enormously boring, because you learn that almost everything in it (except the first three chapters and a piece of chapter nineteen), is a verbal collage of imagery, colors, numbers, and the like from the Old Testament, and these images, numbers, etc. ultimately go back to ancient Hindu scriptures called the Vedas (four major books).

What about the Anti-Christ? There is a whole history of interpretation of this figure. The Anti-Christ was first Nero, then the emperors, then the Pope, and the like. Again, it gets really boring. The idea repeats itself and then passes away.

Second, in terms of this thing called “the Rapture,” there is nothing in church history about “a Rapture” until 1792. If it was so evident and so clear that there would be a Rapture, how come nobody ever thought of it, or anticipated it, for 1600 years?

Third, as we study this, we find this kind of messianic, apocalyptic thinking also in other religions – Hinduism, Islam, and as well as in many other religions. It’s not unique to Christianity.

Fourth, what is it that attracts people to end-time speculation? It’s the idea that I have the inside track, I am ahead of you; it’s a kind of spiritual egotism.

Fifth, and most importantly, as you look at this literature, note what happens to the cross. It is side-tracked. If we look at the book of Revelation itself, and also with this kind of material throughout the Bible, we see: Oh yes, the cross is there, but it is there incidentally, along with a lot of other things. The centrality and importance of the cross is displaced.

The lure of mystery and drama distracts us from what the main thing. As we often note, one of the tricks of the evil one is to convince us that evil isn’t real, that he doesn’t exist, because then he has free rein to lead us away from Christ.

Some time ago, a lapsed Christian wrote an essay, titled: “I believe in deviled eggs.” She didn’t believe in the devil, but she believed in deviled eggs. The author’s grandfather was a preacher, and she writes fondly of her family’s Sunday routine of first church and then to the park for a picnic of chicken, deviled-eggs, Jello, and potato salad, having the family together, playing in the park. She writes that church service was just what “we did before the real religion—the business of living—began.”

For her there is no Lord, no need for forgiveness, and nothing ultimately serious; her religion was the everyday “business of living.” And what’s this thing about the cross? Why believe in God? She was content with “the business of living.”

Where do you find the devil? Not just out there, over there, but under the chair you are sitting in. We fall into his trap when we think evil isn't real, because then he sneaks in our minds and puffs us up with illusions of our goodness and self-sufficiency.

What then do we say about signs and interpreting signs of the times? Matthew 16:4: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah." Jonah was in belly of the whale three days; there were three days between crucifixion and the resurrection. The "sign of Jonah" is a way of saying Christ alone.

What do we say if someone asks us about using the Bible to interpret current events as signs of the end? First, we answer with Mark 13:32: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). And second, we answer with Matthew 16:4 (paraphrase): The only sign is the sign of Jonah, the cross alone.

The cross is the battleground where God in Christ defeated sin, death, and the devil. The resurrection is the validation of his victory.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, an offence to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

Amen