

Good News
Christ Will Reign in Triumph
Ordinary Time Week 33
by Paul Turner

It's old hat. The darkened sun. The bloody moon. The falling stars. We've seen it all before.

When Jesus threatened his listeners with images of a cataclysmic end to the cosmos (Mark 13:24-32), he copied a picture painted many times before. Is this really supposed to grab our attention? These ideas already appeared in several books of the bible.

You want a darkened sky? Check out Isaiah 13:10. On the day that the Lord comes to bring desolation to the earth, the stars and the moon won't shine, and the sun will rise dark. The same idea recurs in 34:4, where Isaiah predicts that the host of heaven will rot away and the skies roll up like a scroll.

In Ezekiel (32:7) God says, "I will blot you out, I will cover the heavens, and make their stars dark." While vowing more decay to the earth, God threatened to wrap the heavens with a cosmic blindfold.

Not enough? Joel adds an earthquake to the scenario (2:10) and predicts the moon will turn the color of blood (2:31). Then, in case you missed it, he repeats the dark view of the future (3:15).

So, those who listen to the scripture have heard it all before. Did Jesus really expect to surprise, frighten, or cajole anyone by repeating the same old threats?

Well, yes. Because they're not the same old threats. Jesus did something new with them. In the past, prophecies reached a climax by predicting the destruction of the cosmos. But for Jesus, that's not the climax. The end of the world is not the end. There's more.

Jesus gave the old prophecies a new twist. He added another prophecy that no one had ever attached before: the prophecy of the Son of Man.

We've heard about the Son of Man before, but never in connection with the traumatic end of the universe. And this context had never before included the Son of Man. In a unique contribution to prophetic literature, Jesus united the two images.

"The Son of Man" has several layers of meaning. It can mean any human being, a savior, Jesus in his ministry, Jesus predicting his passion, or Jesus coming in judgment. It defies simple explanation.

In next Sunday's gospel, the key reference to "the Son of Man" is Daniel 7:13, where the expression identifies a powerful judge coming on clouds of heaven. Here, Jesus applies to himself the image of the Son of Man as judge.

So, Jesus gave new meaning to the old threats by combining several images. He knew about the Son of Man and applied the term to himself. He specifically cited Daniel's image of the Son of Man as judge, thus implying that he was that judge who would come on the clouds of heaven. Then he linked that judgment to the prophecies about the cataclysm of the cosmos. He put the old threats in a new context. He predicted the same, but he predicted more. He foresaw judgment, and proclaimed himself as the judge.

All this gives a bigger picture to the end of the world, and it's not all as frightening as it may first seem. The prognosis we hear in next Sunday's gospel does not forecast complete darkness and gloom. It looks beyond the dark and gloom and discovers Christ, the Son of Man, the all-powerful judge, still reigning. No powers which threaten us have more power than he.

With next Sunday's gospel we bid farewell to Mark who has accompanied us as the primary evangelist for this year. He began his service last fall on the first Sunday of Advent, with a passage from the same chapter which appears next week. Chapter 13 of Mark comes at the conclusion of Jesus' ministry, after his triumphant palm-strewn entry into Jerusalem and just before his arrest, passion, and death. In this chapter Mark presents Jesus' final discourse to his closest disciples, where his thoughts turn to final things.

As our church year draws to its close, our thoughts turn to final things as well. As the disciples learned a lesson from the fig tree, we learn a lesson from autumn. As soon as the leaves turn colors and fall, we know that winter is near. So also is Christ, at the very gates. For a world unstable before natural disaster and human sin, he brings judgment, power, and strength.

The End.