

The end and The End (Mark 13:1-8; Daniel 12:1-3)

Jesus has the prophet's double horizon in view.

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I make it a point to never believe untrue things. I try to maintain an open mind, to weigh the evidence, to pay attention to trustworthy sources. But if I were being led astray, would I know it?

In times of upheaval, the risk of being led astray and falling for false messiahs increases dramatically. This is why Jesus warns his disciples, in what scholars quaintly call Mark's "little apocalypse," that they must take care to guard their minds from falsehoods and their hearts from false allegiances. "Beware," says our Lord, "that no one leads you astray."

Jesus has the prophet's double horizon in view: the proximate end but also The End, the Day of the Lord when all will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory," when the dead shall arise "some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt," when God will wrap up the sky like a scroll and the stars will fall like figs (Mark 13:26; Daniel 12:2; Revelation 6:14). We have to be ready for that last, final, terminal End. But there will be other ends, other moments in history when the ground shifts and words go clinkering down the mountain, truth slugging in piles. We have to watch out for those too, because it's especially in moments of upheaval that our penchant for a savior turns us toward false messiah strongmen.

Sometimes the risk is out and out apostasy, that idolatrous accommodation to the seemingly immovable powers that be. But more often, we'll find ourselves carried

along by the current. Our convictions don't lose their cogency in a bang or even a whimper but in a little blah blah blah. Our conscience ghosts us, and we know something has changed, but what and who and where?

Think about it. You may be mortified at 40 by the idea of white tennis shoes, wraparound sunglasses, and a champagne-tinted Town Car. But there will come a time.

Our truths shift in subtle ways, and we're not always aware of their scutter—in part because we're just generally not aware. But it's also because it's not easy for the I to look at the me without justifying and making excuses.

There's no cure for this. But as with the first disciples, Jesus keeps calling us back to his words which will not pass away—the living words of the living Messiah (Mark 13:31). Love God and love neighbor. That's at the heart of the cruciform gospel that was “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). There's a tautness there that tempers our desires with Christ's love and modulates our opinions to his truth.

The church helps too, that ship with a supernatural ability to right itself over the centuries. We can't go it alone. (Sigh.) We need the gathered two or three to point us a little more faithfully to the one who stands in our midst. We need the great cloud of witnesses, saints from another age who saw human life with other eyes and were faithfully anchored in the gospel (Hebrews 12:1). We need a steadfast spiritual authority who will keep watch over our souls (Hebrews 13:17).

Above all, in times of dramatic upheaval we need to hold fast to the word of life (Philippians 2:16), knowing that to cling to the gospel is really to cling to Jesus.