

Taj M. Smith

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Introduction

Something about the gospel of Mark feels like coming home to me. I tell myself that it's because Mark's is the first gospel I ever studied intensively for my own benefit. Or that I find comfort in this gospel's unique attention to the actions taken by both Jesus and his followers. If I'm being completely honest with myself, it's because of this short and seemingly random apocalyptic section from which we read this morning. Here's a thing you need to know about me: I LOVE apocalyptic literature.

Give me a pile of books with expansive post-apocalyptic landscapes, a messianic figure as a hero, a few unexpected plot twists, and a problem that feels insurmountable and I'll tell you it's a story of hope. And that's because it is. I'm thinking about movies like *The Matrix* and *Star Wars*. Books like J.R.R. Tolkien's

Lord of the Rings and Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Stories where you know that the fight will be all consuming for the protagonists but will ultimately save the world.

These kinds of stories feel comforting because the bad guys lose, and the good guys win. They're black and white, and in times where it feels like everything is falling apart, I feel comforted by that kind of logic even though I know that "real life" isn't that simple. I'm human and sometimes I want to see unlikely heroes pushed to the brink to save something they love. Sometimes, I want to see world-ending problems solved with all the loose ends tied up neatly in a bow. That little bit of hope can be enough to keep me going for at least weeks if not months.

So, I'm always excited to preach apocalyptic scriptures when they come up in the lectionary because this is the tradition from which some of my favorite stories were born, and I'm a sucker for a good ending.

Unpacking Apocalyptic Mark

"But Taj," you might be thinking, "A good ending? Where? How can the world ending be a good thing?" And of course, it'd be remiss to not point this out since the way we talk about apocalypse and apocalyptic literature focuses on the horrors that befall society and the distress that endings bring. In Chapter 13 of Mark's gospel, Jesus describes some horrific events to foretell the coming of the

Son of Man. Leading with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem— Israel's center of religious and political power— certainly shakes Peter, James, John, and Andrew to the point of worry. The temple is the symbol of everything that they hold dear, and news of its upcoming destruction causes them to worry. So, they ask Jesus when these things will take place with what I imagine to be just a hint of panic. Once Jesus has their attention, he exhorts the disciples to watch for the signs that the end draws near. Jesus assures them that the suffering they will experience is only part of the process of the world birthing something new. In doing so, Jesus follows in the footsteps of a long line of apocalyptic prophets, people foretelling drastic societal change using provocative and often disturbing imagery received from God.

This side of Jesus is not one often shown in the gospels. We see Jesus-The-Teacher, Jesus-The-Contemplative, and Jesus-The-Miracle-Worker, but Jesus-The-Prophet feels a little uncomfortable for those of us in the States whose Christianity serves to uphold an inequitable status quo more than it does to bring change. Which brings me to another reason why I love this text: Jesus as a prophet forces us to reckon with the desire for a complete and total upheaval of the status quo that is at the heart of the Christian story.

So, I am a coach, and part of what I do is walk people through exercises to uncover unexamined assumptions that might hinder our progress towards becoming the people we want to be. I'd like to try something with you all right now, an exercise, if you will, to suss out the tone with which you hear the first three verses of this chapter. After I've read them both times, I'll offer you some options for further reflection. Close your eyes if it feels safe for you in this moment. I'm going to read verses 1-3 in two different ways and you notice which one feels true for you. There isn't a right answer, and you don't have to tell anyone which resonates for you.

[Read verses 1-3 in a sad, worried and reverent tone]

Mark 13:1-2 (NRSV) As he 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."

[Read again in a more reflective and expectant tone]

The first tone I used was meant to sound worried and afraid of the destruction that is to come while fearing for how the world will change if these things come to pass. If this one felt true for you, I invite you to do some further reflection on your role in upholding and perpetuating systems that keep people

trapped in cycles of poverty, violence, and oppression, and I'll tell you why in a minute.

The second tone I used was meant to sound as if the coming destruction was something we couldn't wait for, as if saying "we cannot wait for change." If the second one felt true for you, my question to you is this: *What will you do today to help to bring about the world of tomorrow?*

A Story About Me

This is the good news: profound and difficult change brings transformation unlike any other. This is the hope that apocalyptic texts build towards: extreme disruption brings profound change. I'd like to tell you all a little more about myself and how I've come to this understanding of the world. One of the many gifts of being transgender is that of perspective, and I think for me it has helped me see to better understand the delicate dance between endings and transformation.

When I was born, my mom had high hopes for a little girl who would be her tiny twin. Someone who would wear dresses and make-up, be excited about clothes, boys, and prom, and all of those other things that girls are stereotypically excited about. You can imagine her surprise when she got me. A grubby tomboy who was more content to roll around in the dirt than to play dress-up. As a kid, I

lived for sports and cars. I loved muscle cars and could tell you the year and model of any Ford Mustang on the road. All I wanted was to play basketball, play guitar, skateboard, and hang out with the guys while they worked on their show-cars. I didn't care about clothes or make-up and I had no patience for people who did. My interest in boys developed from my interest in not being teased. From a young age, I knew I that I was different, but I didn't know how to describe it.

I remember being about 10-years old when 20/20 aired a story about a transgender boy. They talked to him about his transition and went with him when he got his first "boy" haircut. I remember how supportive his mom was of his transition and how happy he was when he stepped into his newly re-decorated "boy" room. My eyes must have widened as I watched him jump around as he listened to his stereo because, at that point, my mom leaned forward and said, "Don't you go getting any ideas" in that tone that moms use when they know their kid is about to cause trouble. But I already had the ideas, and in that moment, I learned that I needed to hide them. I learned that those feelings could end everything that my life was by just uttering three words: "I'm a boy." So, for the next 12 years, I hid. I aligned myself with a past that felt comfortable because the future—and the truth—felt so frightening.

In 2009, I gave myself the choice between admitting to being trans or ending my life. The weight of my entire life leading up to that point became too much to bear, and I decided that something needed to change. I felt that my only choices were to die or to transition. I chose to transition, thus ending my life as I knew it.

The day I came out, the sky was a shade of blue that I had never seen and life had this ominous feel to it that I hadn't noticed until then. I felt terrified, relieved, anxious, and awestruck. My heart was in my throat and I couldn't get on the bus for fear of feeling trapped inside of something I couldn't get out of. I hiked across the forest that is UC Santa Cruz to meet my good friend Julian in the spot where we would talk about what transitioning meant. Julian had started transitioning before me. Though they were younger than me, they were wiser in navigating everyday things like bathrooms and name changes. We met on a grassy hill overlooking out at the whole Monterey Bay. I didn't say anything for a good 10 minutes after sitting down. I was trembling. They noticed. They didn't ask if I was OK because they knew that I wasn't. They understood the fear that I felt and did their best to comfort me, knowing that there is no comfort for such endings. Endings such as these can only pass by forward movement. At some point in our conversation, I fell completely silent mid-sentence. I don't remember

what I had been talking about, but I remember stopping to say, “This is what God feels like.” My friend was confused. Here I was, shaking, crying, anxious, terrified, and finally feeling God.

My journey since has been an endless quest for reunion with God, but to get here, I had to end. I needed to tear down the false idols I had built up in my mind around what I should do and what I’ve always done so that I could become something more than anyone ever thought I could. Years later, I would reflect on that moment with my friend on the hill and think of it as the moment the temple inside of me was torn down. That temple in which I worshipped social norms and conventions to the point of denying the person God called me to be. I let it fall, and everything else after that just started falling into place.

Message

So what’s the message here? It can be summed up in the idea that sometimes, what’s most uncomfortable and disturbing to us can also be a site for great transformation. For me and many other transgender people, taking the steps we need to live as our authentic selves is often the transformation that leads to a life lived with joy and purpose. For you, it might be something different. Perhaps the temple within you that must be destroyed is an allegiance to ideas

and systems that only serve the most privileged portion of the population. Maybe it's an outdated assumption of what it means to "be the church." Whatever it is, I encourage you to look for the signs that it is crumbling and let it fall. Because once it's collapsed, you will have so much ground upon which to build something extraordinary.

Amen.