

WHEN THE STARS BEGIN TO FALL

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

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"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory." Mark 13:24-37

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark is one of the most difficult chapters for a modern reader to understand. William Barclay describes it as "one of the most Jewish chapters in the Bible." It's filled with ancient Jewish ideas and allusions to Old Testament prophecies. For example, what Jesus said about the sun, moon, and stars echoes something Isaiah prophesied just before the fall of the city of Babylon hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. Isaiah wrote,

The stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark at its rising,
and the moon will not shed its light.

Isaiah wasn't writing about the end of the world but the fall of Babylon. Babylon, mighty Babylon, Babylon the great is going to fall. It will come like the end of the world

For some of us the world ends many times before we die. For example, I think of Matthew. During the funeral eulogy in the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Matthew recites a poem by W.H. Auden in honor of his deceased lover, Gareth.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.
The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Gareth's death extinguished the sun, moon and stars for Matthew. The death of a loved one often hits us like the end of the world. And most of us, if we live long enough, experience the end of the world before we die.

The disciples of Jesus experienced the end of the world a number of times before they died. His disciples could have written Auden's poem after the death of Jesus. When Jesus died, their world ended. Jesus was their North, their South, their East and West. He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He was the Sun of righteousness and the Bright Morning Star. He was "fair as the moon, clear as the sun." But when his enemies hung Jesus on the cross, and he breathed his last, the sun and moon were darkened and the stars fell from heaven. I can imagine the disciples saying in dark despair -

This is the end
Beautiful friend
This is the end
My only friend, the end

Of our elaborate plans, the end
Of everything that stands, the end
No safety or surprise, the end
I'll never look into your eyes...again (The Doors)

The death of Jesus was the end of the world for his disciples.

The world of the early Christians came to an end again in A.D. 70 when Roman legions destroyed Jerusalem. Years before, Jesus could see what was coming. He warned his disciples of Jerusalem's impending doom just a few days before his death. St. Mark tells us in our Gospel reading that he was sitting on the Mount of Olives with Peter, James, John and Andrew. They looked across the Kidron Valley and saw "the great walled city of Jerusalem, with the temple crowning it at its highest point. Jesus had told them that the whole place would come tumbling down one day soon (Barbara Brown Taylor)." Jesus said of that time to come, "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven." He used language that every Jew in his day understood. He wasn't speaking of the end of the natural world but the end of the world as it was then known (N.T. Wright). The end of Jerusalem!

Destruction of the temple! Exile from the Holy Land! Their dispersion throughout the earth!
The destruction of Jerusalem came like the end of the world for the disciples of Jesus.

I know this passage about the darkened sun and moon and the fallen stars has been used by zealous evangelists to scare people. It's often interpreted as a prophecy of the end of the world and the return of Christ. But Jesus didn't say these things to scare his disciples (Barbara Brown Taylor). He said it to comfort them. His disciples needed to know that even something as frightening as the destruction of the temple and cruel persecution was in God's good hands. When the sun and moon stop shining and the stars fall from the sky God is sovereign over darkness. That's good news.

When the lights go out, God is still in control. The physical world did not come to an end when Babylon fell. Rather it meant the return of the Jews to the Promised Land and the rebirth of their nation. And the physical world didn't come to an end when Jesus died. Rather his disciples lived to see Jesus risen from the dead and ascending into heaven on the clouds with great power and glory. ~~And the end of the physical world did not come when Jerusalem was~~ destroyed in A.D. 70. Rather it meant that Christians were forced out into the world. They went ^{like angels} preaching the good news and gathering God's elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Some of you may feel like your world has come to an end. The stars have fallen from heaven. Your world has come crashing down. You've lost loved ones. Your marriage is falling apart. Some of you have been diagnosed with cancer. Your kids are driving you crazy. You have financial burdens that you feel you will never get out from under. But the good news is that God is sovereign over darkness. Just watch and keep awake and you'll see.

The Risen Christ will come to comfort us, not frighten us. He promises a new creation. The old will have to perish, before the new creation can begin. We don't know what the future holds. We don't know what the new millennium holds. But God is sovereign. God is in control. God is going to win in the end. God is the invisible mover and shaker who is

sovereign - who is creating a new heaven and earth. And the Risen Christ is the firstborn of the new creation.

Our job is to watch for signs of God's new creation. The new creation has begun in the resurrection of Christ but it's far from complete. Yet every now and then, every here and there we see a glimpse of God's new creation. In fact, this morning we see signs of Christ's coming in the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion. If you feel like your world has come to an end, watch for him. Look for the Risen Christ when you come to take the bread and cup. He will come to you. I don't know when he will come. I don't know how he will come. But he'll do what he has promised. He'll make the sun, moon and stars shine again.

Last Tuesday evening we knew Philip was driving home from Penn State. We weren't sure when he left. We weren't sure when he'd arrive. But we watched. We waited. It was foggy. The moon did not give its light. There were no stars shining. We worried. Eventually, we grew weary watching and we fell asleep. Then I was awakened by headlights in the driveway. I heard a car door slam shut. I was suddenly awake. Philip's home! We ran to open the door and embrace him.

When the sun is darkened, the moon does not give its light, and the stars fall from heaven we watch for Christ's promised coming. "The one who is coming is not an enemy but a friend." Our job is to stay awake and watch and open the door for him before he raises his hand to knock. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

Let us pray: Eternal God,
you taught us that the night is far spent
and the day is at hand.
Keep us awake and alert, watching for your kingdom,
and make us strong in faith,
so that when Christ comes in glory to judge the earth,
we may joyfully give him praise;
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.