



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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“Do Not Be Led Astray”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On July 7, 2024, from Mark 13:1-13

“What do they think is going to happen?” This is what theologian Adam Kotsko said to a student who asked “If all the legitimate democratic means for creating change are cut off, what are we supposed to do? Are you advocating violence?” Kotsko was on a panel commemorating Milton Friedman’s book *Capitalism and Freedom*, and talking about the growing number of ways the will of the American people has been thwarted by gerrymandering, the Senate filibuster, the Electoral College, and the Supreme Court, all of which will be intensified if Donald Trump regains office. Kotsko said he was not advocating violence, but pointing out that the [far-right] has created a situation in which the American people have been left without any non-violent means of creating the kind of society they want to live in; and so, he simply asked, “What do they think is going to happen?”

The far-right’s answer to the question is, “there will be blood.” On Monday, Kevin Roberts, leader of the Heritage Foundation, and creator of the ultra-fascist vision for America, Project 2025, said, “In spite of all this nonsense from the left, we are going to win. We’re taking this country back. We are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless, [only] if the left allows it to be.” This is a threat that implies an expectation of violence from the left in response to the implementation of their draconian vision. If you haven’t yet heard of Project 2025, it includes a plan to dismantle the state by removing employment protections for federal employees that have been in place for 135 years, making civil servants easier to fire and replace with right-wing loyalists. After that, Project 2025 plans to eliminate the Department of Education, reduce the scope of Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, cut back benefits for Veterans, roll back renewable-energy programs, limit mail-order abortion pills, and remove diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies.²

Four years have passed since George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis, sparking a racial “reckoning.” However, many scholars now believe the reckoning is over as that white backlash against the movement has birthed a more monstrous and brazen fascism. Many insurrectionists who attacked the Capitol on January 6 were not held accountable. State legislatures have pushed through anti-protest measures and anti-trans bills. Conservative campaigns and book bans against teaching Critical Race Theory, slavery, Black history, and diversity, equity and inclusion are sweeping across the country. Last June, the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade* and affirmative action. Donald Trump is once again the Republican nominee for president, promising to root out “the radical-left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country.”³ And this past Monday the Supreme Court granted Trump immunity in all official actions, which experts say will go down in history as a far worse day for America than January 6 as it gave Trump and all future Presidents permission to break the law without consequences.



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If you're not concerned about the future of America, you should be! The last week has been especially bleak. Everyone I've talked to lately has been carrying the weight of civic depression, and the common refrain I hear is, "Things are so bad right now." It is easy to be mired in a fog of disappointment and despair. Generally, we feel like the only thing we have the strength to do right now is get up in the morning, brace ourselves for the news, speculate on the latest palace intrigue, desperately tell our friends and neighbors to vote, hold our breath and wait, hoping to God we wake up in some semblance of a democracy on November 6th. If we take the headlines seriously, it sounds like everyone believes we are on the brink of the end of democracy.

Last November, opinion writers at The Hill claimed the 2024 election could be the end of democracy. In January, Bernie Sanders said if Trump wins it will be the end of democracy. A deluge of articles came out in February, after Jack Posobiec told the crowd at CPAC, "We are here to overthrow [democracy] completely. We didn't get all the way there on January 6, but we endeavor to get rid of it." In March, Trump predicted that if he loses it will be the end of democracy. And just this week, MSNBC host Chris Hayes said we can't let Trump end our democracy. The urgency of the current moment has Americans living in apocalyptic anxiety. Whenever I hear someone say it's the end of democracy, I think of Jim Morrison from The Doors hauntingly crooning, "This is the end. My only friend, the end." Or, if you're Gen-X you may think of R.E.M.'s song, "It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)." But we don't feel fine, do we? Is it really the end of democracy? How are we called to live in this apocalyptic moment?

It is almost universally agreed the gospel of Mark was written in 69 AD, in the middle of the Jewish-Roman war. Widening gaps between the wealthy aristocracy and the poor led to an economic crisis, and in 66 AD an army of Jewish Zealots led a rebellion, defeated the Roman 12th Legion, captured Jerusalem, liberated Palestine, and installed a provisional government. Humiliated by the defeat, Roman emperor Nero sent his top general Vespasian with four legions to take back Judea. Despite heroic Jewish resistance, Vespasian captured Galilee and Western Judea in short order. By June of 68, he was preparing for a siege of Jerusalem when something unexpected happened. The emperor Nero died, and Rome became locked in a civil war with four candidates vying for the throne. Vespasian was recalled to the capital, and the Jewish rebels believed God had saved the holy city, with a reprieve of a year and a half to prepare for inevitable confrontation with Rome.⁴

Vespasian would prevail as emperor and send General Titus to finish off the Palestinian rebels and destroy Jerusalem. Titus began his siege in April of 70 AD, and after five months of pitched battle, Jerusalem fell, and the temple was burned to the ground. But in the grace period of 69 AD, when Mark's gospel was written, the Jewish resistance believed God had intervened on their behalf, a sure sign of the messianic age.



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They conjured the old myth of restoring the Davidic monarchy and went through Palestine calling on the faithful to join them for the “final battle.” All true Jews, they claimed, should take up arms and defend the holy city from their Roman oppressors. Zealots were even successful at recruiting followers of Jesus, convincing them their holy war was a critical event that would hasten the return of the Messiah. The apocalyptic fervor surrounding the war put the church in Antioch, where Mark’s gospel was written, in a precarious situation. In fact, the very reason Mark wrote the gospel in the first place may have been to help the church respond to war.

Mark was concerned about the danger the war posed to his community. People were sympathetic to the fight against Roman oppression, and many believed the end was at hand. Some had already been drafted into the war, others were sorely tempted to join. Who could resist the lure of patriotism, ethnic and national pride, the hope that the long-deferred promise of a final battle where God would vindicate Israel from its enemies had finally come? The critical question was: should the followers of Jesus take up arms in a holy war and violently defend the city of Jerusalem against the Romans? Mark’s answer to this question was a resounding “No!” And in such a moment, there was only one voice he could summon to match the persuasive call of the rebel recruiters. So, Mark employed the words Jesus gave his own disciples about the destruction of the Temple to address the conflict that his community found itself in during the height of the Jewish-War.

Instead of calling people to defend the Temple, Jesus had predicted its destruction. The disciples were astonished by this teaching and approached Jesus in private for a deeper explanation as they often did when confused. Their questions for Jesus were two-fold: 1) when will “these things” happen? 2) what will be the sign they are about to be accomplished? Basically, “When will it happen?” and “How will we know?” These are perfectly legitimate questions we can relate to. We are similar to the disciples. We want answers to our question. We want to know the time. We’d love to have a sign. It would be fantastic if Jesus would just tell us when democracy is going to end and what sign we should look for? We could plan our move to Canada, pull our money out of the bank, or build a bomb shelter, or hide out in the mountains. It would be nice to know because the anxiety we feel about the future is often the result of not knowing what’s going to happen. We’re constantly doom scrolling the news media thinking to ourselves, “Lord, give us a sign!”

But Jesus would not tell his disciples when or give them a sign. Instead, he said, “Beware no one leads you astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Contrary to the way these apocalyptic words have been used by evangelicals to scare us all into thinking we’re in the end times, Jesus argued the opposite. His vision conflicted with the Zealot’s hopes of revolution because he refused to connect the cataclysmic events of his time with the end of history.



The evangelical interpretation of this passage has more in common with the Zealots who were recruiting support for their messianic war. Jesus, however, took sharp issue with this interpretation and proclaimed an alternative truth. All the wars and rumors of war, cataclysmic political events, and natural disasters are not the end at all. They are the beginning. They are the birth pangs of a new reality that is coming into being.

I often wonder if every generation mistakenly imagines that our situation is more apocalyptic than the generations that have come before us. When we look at Christians over the last 2000 years, it is astonishing how many believed they were living in the end times. We are living in a time when American democracy seems precarious, but we're not living during the Jewish-Roman War, the destruction of the Temple, or obliteration of our entire way of life; at least not yet. The Roman army was bearing down on Jerusalem. Followers of Jesus were being recruited by Zealots. The threat of violence and destruction was at an all-time high. In fact, the Temple was destroyed less than a year after Mark's gospel was written, yet Jesus still proclaimed it was not the end. People who proclaim the end has come can be incredibly persuasive. They can incite good people into violent activities. As Voltaire said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." But Jesus did not threaten people with apocalyptic rhetoric. Instead, he cautioned his followers, "Do not be led astray by war, rumors, natural disasters, apocalyptic calls for violence, or false prophets saying this is the end! It may look like the end and feel like the end, but it is not the end. It is only the beginning. These are the contractions of a new creation."

There is something incredibly counter-intuitive and hopeful in Jesus' proclamation. He makes no pretensions about Roman power and no illusions about the destruction of the Temple, yet he also refused to condone the Zealot's violence, to consent to their claims it was the end of history or permit his followers to participate in the war against Rome. His message is not one of passivity or withdrawal, and he will not even entertain the idea of collaboration with their oppressors. In contrast, Jesus offered a third way by calling his followers to engage in two holy activities in midst of the dire situation they faced: watch and preach. We may want Jesus to say "Fight!" "Protest!" and "Organize!" But he said, "Catastrophe is unavoidable. Do not be led astray by apocalyptic anxiety! Instead, you must keep watch and preach the gospel." What did he mean? How is that going to help us change the world?

We know what it means to preach. We've heard it all our lives. It is to proclaim the good news of Jesus, the good news of love and justice, life and peace, grace and truth, liberation, and release. It means to preach this message with our bodies, lives, and resources every single day, and when necessary, use words. It means that no matter how bad the news becomes, we still have good news in our hearts to hold as hope and to hand on to our neighbors who are hurting. And it's not just good news for Americans, but good news for all the nations, for all people of the earth.



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We might forget about the good news or get so overwhelmed by bad news we have a hard time believing in the good news, but we still know what it means to preach, and the good news is always available and ready whenever we are, to be embraced and shared like a word of love, a loaf of bread, or a simple act of hospitality. The good news of God's kingdom, the good news of a different reality, must be shared as an antidote to the bad news of our world, so Jesus said, "Preach!"

But he also said, "Watch," which is a harder to understand. It comes up often in the gospels: "Beware!" "Watch out!" "Stay awake"—all varieties of same command. Jesus told parables that end with this imperative. It was his unique way of calling his followers to vigilance and faithfulness in a time of trial and tribulation. To be vigilant is not to be violent. Nor is it to fall into escapism or fatalism. It is to live as an alternative witness engaged in the work of active resistance to the forces of greed, violence, oppression, and injustice in our world. Jesus called his followers to resist, but unlike the Zealots, his call was always non-violent. To participate in violence—whether revolutionary or state violence—does not change things at a fundamental level. The Zealots employed violence to reconsecrate the old order, reform the state of Israel, and re-establish the Monarchy. But Jesus called for a more fundamental change, a complete unraveling of the old system, a total overturning of the established order. He called his followers to embrace life as if it were a permanent garden of Gethsemane, to stay awake in the darkness of history, to refuse to compromise with the politics of death, and to engage vigilantly in nonviolent resistance against the powers of violence for the sake of creating a community of love, justice, and peace.

As Dr. King proclaimed, "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." King also said, "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and complicated ones. It destroys community and makes solidarity impossible. It leaves us in a monologue rather than a dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself."⁵

As people of faith and good conscience in America today we are as anxious about the downfall of democracy as the disciples were about the destruction of the Temple. And just like then, there are wars and rumors of war. Everyone seems to be saying the end has come. False prophets on all sides are recruiting people into their ranks. Many are asking, "When will the destruction happen? What will be the signs? What should we do? Should we fight? Is this the end?" Jesus' words pierce through the cacophony of questions and apocalyptic anxiety with a clarion call,



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“Do not be led astray. There will be wars and rumors of war, false prophets and fake news, nation will rise against nation, faction against faction, party against party, kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines, earthquakes, and hurricanes. There will always be people trying to convince you that this is the end. But do not be alarmed. Do not be led astray. This is not the end! The end is yet to come!”

You’ve heard it said, “this is the end of democracy,” but Jesus says, “this is only the beginning.” You’ve heard it said, “this the end of the church,” but Jesus says, “this is only the beginning.” You’ve heard it said, “this is the end of America, but Jesus says, “this is only the beginning.” You’ve heard it said, “this is the end of the world,” but Jesus says, “this is only the beginning.” You’ve heard it said, “this is the time for violence, but Jesus says, “this is the time for the good news of love, peace, justice.” You’ve heard it said, “this is the time to defend the old way, but Jesus says, “this is the time for a new beginning.” It is the time for vigilance, it is the time for non-violent resistance to the forces of injustice and oppression. It is the time for something new to be born in and among us. Yes, things may look bleak today, but we must understand the pain and struggle we face right now are the birth pangs of a new reality, the contractions of a new creation, the labor that comes before our delivery. We cannot give up now, we cannot give in at this moment, we cannot be led astray. We must keep watch like sentinels who shine like bright lights in the midst of darkness. We must get out the vote like our lives depend on it. And we must preach the good news of love and justice until the world begins again. This is not the end my friends. This is the new beginning, and we need to learn to live like we’re just getting started.

¹ Adam Kotsko, “What do they think is going to happen?” An und für sich blog, Tuesday July 2, 2024. ² “Project 2025 Leader Promises Second American Revolution,” Newsweek, Published Jul 03, 2024, at 8:05 AM EDT, Updated Jul 03, 2024, at 5:18 PM EDT. ³ Rachel Poser, “Ibram X. Kendi Faces a Reckoning of His Own,” New York Times Magazine, June 4, 2024. ⁴ Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus, Orbis Books, 1988. ⁵ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 1964.