

This is often called Mark's little apocalypse. All three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – have a similar passage. The term little apocalypse sets them apart from the big apocalypse in the book of Revelation.

Apocalypse means revelation, or unveiling. Hang on to that because it's an important part of understanding what writing like this is...and what it isn't.

Jewish apocalyptic writing became popular after the exile. It was a time of bitter disappointment. It was a time of conquest by one after another foreign empire. Times of upheaval and fear always tend to bring out more end-time prophecies. In the Old Testament, the book of Daniel is the best example.

They're written to give hope to people who long to know that God is at work to put things right, even when everything is a mess.

Apocalypse does not in fact reveal how and when the world will end. The strange and often frightening images in apocalyptic writing are symbolic of a cosmic battle between God and the forces of evil. They are really meant to give people hope that in the end, God will prevail.

Apocalypse is also not a step-by-step road map to the future. Of course that doesn't stop people from trying to make it that. It's so tempting. I mean, just look.

There will be wars and rumors of wars...wait, we've got wars...and rumors that any one of them could get much bigger.

And hey, we've got famine. I mean people are starving in Gaza, although that's a manmade famine. There are famines in several countries in Africa, mostly brought on by war mixed with climate change.

And earthquakes? Wasn't there just one not too long ago somewhere? Well, yes. There are roughly 55 earthquakes daily throughout the world.

And what about the one the Bible never mentioned – climate change. Which probably will, if it doesn't already, exacerbate the problem of famine, war, and...according to some scientists, maybe even earthquakes.

If you ask a population of millennials and Gen Z people what they think is the biggest harbinger of the end of the world, a significant proportion of them will say climate change.

The pandemic for some seemed like an omen of the end.

So, this is it, right? The end is near? It all matches up.

Some say yes, although some of them are more likely to be connected to weird conspiracies there's little, if any, biblical support for.

But we also know that these words could describe many times in world history.

Notice that this speech of Jesus doesn't end there. We can't predict the end on the basis of current events because Jesus said we couldn't.

He said this was just the beginning of the birth pangs. Birth pangs which have been going on for millennia, as God works to bring God's kingdom to its fulfillment.

It's not our job to figure out when that will happen. It's not ours to know when Christ will return.

Our question for each passage since we began our trip through Mark is, how does this passage show the kingdom of God? Remember back at the beginning of Mark's gospel, Jesus kicked off his ministry by saying "the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news."

What is the good news here?

It is harder to see in apocalyptic writing. The images of destruction are troubling.

And honestly, apocalyptic writings in some Christian circles have come to mean something that is anything but good news. The Rapture is hard to see as anything other than frightening. If you want to have a conversation about how the rapture is not biblical, hit me up. But after the rapture it's supposed to be truly awful for those left behind. And that is supposedly what God wills.

Part of finding good news in apocalyptic writing is reading it through the lens of the rest of God's work. God creates, sustains, loves. So much that God became human in the person of Jesus for our sake and the sake of the world. How does God's destruction of the world fit with anything we've come to believe and trust in the God we meet in Jesus?

It doesn't fit at all with the vision of the kingdom of God Jesus unveiled – the one where demons are cast out and people are healed and restored to wholeness in their communities.

It doesn't fit with the Jesus who fed thousands with a little bread and fish...or with the Jesus who sent his disciples out to cast out demons and heal the sick.

And it certainly doesn't fit with the Jesus who went to his death, refusing to fight Rome and the religious authorities on their terms.

But here's what the passage does fit with...Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple.

The Temple had become something that served, not God or the ordinary people, but rather the empire and the priestly group who collaborated with Rome.

It had become a twisted version of what God intended for it. It is possible for evil to be disguised as good – holy even.

Jesus' act in the Temple was a foreshadowing of the prediction Jesus makes here – the Temple will be destroyed. This was both symbolic and real.

By the time Mark wrote, it probably already had happened. A failed revolt led by Zealots resulted in the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. The remaining West Wall is what you see in the picture on the bulletin.

This passage reveals that the kingdoms which stand opposed to God's kingdom will fall. And that's not just true for first century Palestine. At its heart, apocalyptic writing reveals that in the cosmic battle between God and evil, God wins.

We can't know exactly where we are in time, relative to whatever the end looks like. And we don't need to – we can confidently leave the future in the hands of the God who created and loves us.

What we are called to do is what Jesus said. We stay awake. In verse 35, Jesus says Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn.

And we are reminded that it was in the evening when Judas left to betray Jesus. It was in the evening when Peter, James, and John could not stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It was midnight when Judas brought soldiers to arrest Jesus.

It was at cock crow that Peter realized that his denial of Jesus had happened exactly as Jesus said it would. By dawn Jesus was on his way to crucifixion, alone. His disciples had fled.

They all betrayed him. We are called to stay awake so that we do not betray him all over again.

We are called to be awake when false prophets, especially those who claim to be Christian, try to convince us of a twisted version of Jesus that the gospels do not show.

We are called to be awake...to be aware of Jesus' teachings and his revelation of the love God has for the world.

We are called to be awake for signs of the inbreaking of God's kingdom. Places where we see violent systems of dominance overcome by the power of love. Where the power of death is overcome by the power of resurrection.

We watch and wait, not for fear of our salvation – that is securely in the hands of the God who created, sustains, and loves us.

We watch and wait for signs of the unfolding kingdom of God and our chance to be a part.

And we trust, that in spite of wars and famine and natural and manmade disaster, these are birth pangs. On the other side of that labor, we see through the eyes of hope...through the eyes of resurrection.

Like a mother who puts aside the pain of childbirth as she gazes at her newborn, we will see that God truly has birthed a new world. In spite of all appearances to the contrary in the present time, Christ will reign over heaven and earth.