

## Telling Time

A friend recently observed that some of us might benefit from a daily morning ritual practiced by preschools the world over to help children learn to tell time. Each morning she posts the day of the week, the date, and an observation about the weather outside her window. So here we go: today is Sunday, the 29<sup>th</sup> day of March, the year is 2020, and it is gray and a little rainy outside. It is funny to think we need something this simple, something this old school to help us keep track of something as basic as the day of the week, but we are not living in normal times. I am fairly certain that not one of us lived through the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1918. In a few short weeks we have become expert hand-washers, and experts on Zoom, FaceTime, and Facebook live. We have gathered virtually for board games, birthday parties, bible study, dance lessons, and evening prayer. Our favorite restaurants are reduced to take out and delivery, if they are still open. Friends and family are facing layoffs or furloughs. Beloved health care workers are working overtime and begging the rest of us to stay home. Life looks exceedingly different from the way it did even three weeks ago. So a check-in, even of the most basic kind like remembering how to tell time is a good thing.

Our passage from Mark picks up where we left off last week. It is still Tuesday of Holy Week, and Jesus and the disciples have just left the Temple. As they are leaving, the disciples marvel at the massive stones used to build the Temple walls. It is so easy for me to shake my head at the disciples. Haven't they been listening to Jesus inside those walls? Don't they know that everything those stones now represent has been called into question? The stones are massive and impressive, and this is the first visit to the big city of Jerusalem for these Galilean country bumpkins, so maybe I should cut them a little more slack, especially when Jesus tells them that those impressive stones will soon be rubble. This is huge. This moment is huge. Just because I know where it's headed—with 2000 years of hindsight, doesn't mean I get to write them off.

It also helps if I remember the people who first hear and read Mark's gospel. As you probably know, the gospel accounts are not written down right away. They are not a play-by-play account of Jesus' life. It is believed that Mark's gospel—the earliest one—is compiled around the year 70 CE. That means that the original

audience has seen or is about to see the destruction of the Temple and the toppling of its massive stones. So much of what our Jewish ancestors longed for and banked on is housed in the Temple. It is the place King David dreams of and the sanctuary King Solomon brings to fruition. After the fall of the divided kingdoms, the people of ancient Israel survive the exile in part by promising themselves and their children and grandchildren that the Temple will rise again. And it does. After the exile, the Temple is rebuilt, and finally, under King Herod the Great, a Jewish king propped up by the Romans, the Temple undergoes substantial renovations and expansion. The work is finished in 63 CE, and it is a wonder to behold. It is beautiful, intricate, massive, and impressive. And it appears unshakeable and everlasting, until the horrific siege of Jerusalem when the force of the Roman Empire is loosed upon it.

So the words Jesus speaks are offered to the disciples and to the early church, as well as the church today. This chapter of scripture is known as “Mark’s Little Apocalypse”—as if any apocalypse can be considered “little.” It is important to remember that apocalyptic literature with its fiery and fearsome imagery is intended not to frighten, but to offer hope. Jesus names a reality that Mark’s readers and hearers know firsthand. The walls are tumbling down. The world has been upended. People are frightened. Communities are on edge. Life as they have known it has come to an end. And if the massive, solid temple walls cannot hold, what can be trusted to last? Where can the people find hope?

Jesus speaks of *sufferings*. Other translations call them *birth pangs*, meaning that the trials and pain are not for nothing. Something new is being born. It is not that God is sending suffering to teach us a lesson; rather, Jesus insists that out of the trials God is creating something new. Suffering and scary things are inevitable, but they are not the end of the story.

A colleague mentioned this week that she serves a community that has been through a substantial amount of trauma. She leads a relatively new worshiping community made up largely of gay, lesbian, and trans people who have suffered abuse and/or neglect from family members, from society, and in many cases from the church. She reminded those of us gathered—online, more than 6 feet apart—that those who have faced trauma have specific needs. They need routine; they need those they count on to show up when they say they will show up and to follow through on promises made. They need ritual and connection. She also pointed out that as a

nation and as a world we are all suffering through trauma at this moment. Yes, it takes different forms and manifests at different levels. My experience is nothing like that of the doctors and nurses in Italy or Brooklyn or that of their families waiting and worrying at home. My experience is wholly different from that of a single parent of a special needs child who has just been laid off from her job. My experience is not that of a hospice patient who must receive a prayer from his pastor from the other side of a window. But we are suffering; we are grieving.<sup>1</sup> Our world has been turned on its head, so much remains unknown, and we will be changed when all is said and done.

The same can be said of the disciples and of the early church. Jesus knows it. And Mark does, too. I did not remember that the writer of Mark breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the reader. As one of you noted in bible study this past week—again more than 6 feet apart, online—we are readers of Mark, too. The words in this gospel are meant for us, as much as they are meant for the first ones to hear them. And like my friend with her very simple preschool morning updates in the midst of an upside down world, Jesus points the disciples, the early church, and us back to small signs of hope. He tells them that when the walls are crumbling, he is near, close enough to knock on our door. He tells them to pay attention, to do the jobs they and we are called to do as best we can, and to look for hope in something as small as a bud on a tree. And he promises that even if the heavens and earth pass away, his words will remain.

So when the graphs grow steep and the news grows dire, by the grace of God, I am going to cling to Jesus' words. I do not know when or how this latest chapter will end, so I am going to do my best to tell time with Jesus and pay close attention to what I can see and do right now. I am going to watch the buds on the dogwood trees as they blossom. I am going to relish voices of choirs around the world as they manage to sing hymns using cell phones. I am going to give standing ovations to health care workers and build wobbly playdough towers with my young friends online. I am going to gather through Zoom and Facebook Live with you for worship and bible study. I am going to laugh and cry with friends over FaceTime. I am going to rest and read and plant flowers and weep and check in with loved ones. I am going to cherish hearing familiar voices and seeing beloved faces in new ways. I am going to put bears and Easter eggs and candles and hearts in my

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

windows. I am going to smile and say hello with gusto when I run through my neighborhood. I am going to lift my shaky voice alongside siblings around the globe and cry out to God for a world where the walls are crumbling and people are hurting. I am going to do everything within my power to preach the Good News of life and hope and compassion and courage and encourage everyone within the sound of my voice to do the same. And I am going to listen to this One who teaches me to tell time in a new way, this One who tells me not to worry over when or how it all will end; I am going to lean on this One who calls me to watch, to open my eyes and my heart to see both the suffering and the hope here and now. For Jesus knows how it feels to suffer; he knows what it is to be betrayed and abandoned; he knows how it sounds to cry out in agony; he knows what it is to wait, longing for a new day to dawn. And he knows what it looks like to be raised to new life and usher in a new age, a new age that begins with a criminal's cross and an empty tomb. This age that cannot be ended by death or disease. It is not defined by isolation or fear, nor can it ever be contained by walls, no matter how big or strong or impressive they may be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.