

# HOLY DISRUPTION

*Discovering Advent  
in the Gospel of Mark*

TRACY S. DAUB

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*To Vic and Janet  
and their example of steadfast love*

*To the Western New York congregations of  
Central Presbyterian Church, Buffalo;  
North Presbyterian Church, North Tonawanda;  
and University Presbyterian Church, Buffalo,  
whose educational ministries gave rise to this book*

*And to my husband, Timothy Wadkins,  
whose encouragement and support  
made this book a reality*

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## Introduction

# WHERE'S THE BABY?

IMAGINE IT'S EARLY DECEMBER AND, LIKE many folks, you head up to the attic to retrieve the Christmas decorations. One of the boxes you carefully open is the nativity set. To your surprise, you cannot find the stable with its giant star glued to the roof. Nor can you find shepherds grasping their crooks or any fluffy sheep to group around them. The box contains no

regal-looking magi, no weary camels, no winged angels in long flowing robes. You are shocked to discover that the box contains no infant Jesus or his little manger bed either. “Wait a minute,” you wonder. “Where’s the *baby*?”

Turning to the Gospel of Mark at Christmas-time is like trying to arrange a nativity set without the key characters. Mark’s Gospel contains no story of Jesus’ birth. There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, no heavenly band of angels announcing the Messiah’s birth, no wise men who follow the star, meet up with King Herod, and offer gifts to the Christ child. Most significantly, there is no baby Jesus. Those characters that populate our nativity sets come entirely from the birth narratives in Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels. Admittedly we are drawn to these nativity stories because in the midst of a very hard and harsh world, the babe is a gift of tenderness, hope, and innocence. Matthew’s and Luke’s birth narratives provide origin stories to explain the beginnings of this extraordinary man of God, this extraordinary man of love. He began as a baby, a gift of love

wrapped in swaddling clothes. We can't imagine Christmas without the baby!

While the Gospel of John does not include the birth of the baby Jesus, it does provide a type of origin story for Jesus. John offers a *theological* explanation for Jesus' entry into the world. Describing Jesus as "the Word," John writes that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." And then John offers his version of Jesus' birth when he writes, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). John's Gospel supplies the fundamental theological meaning of Christmas, which is the belief that in some mysterious way, God became human in the person of Jesus. These passages about what Christians refer to as *the incarnation* are cherished Christmas-time Scriptures and join the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke in providing glimpses into Jesus' origins.

In noticeable contrast to Matthew, Luke, and John, Mark offers no origin story for Jesus

at all. Mark bypasses Jesus' birth and his childhood entirely, makes no mention whatsoever of Jesus' father, and offers only a few passing references to Jesus' mother, Mary. Instead, Mark begins his account with a fully grown Jesus as he commences his ministry.

It could be argued that Mark's "beginning" story for Jesus is found at Jesus' baptism, where God declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved" (1:11). A case could also be made that Mark considered his entire Gospel to be Jesus' "beginning" story. Mark opens his Gospel by stating in the very first sentence, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," giving the impression that the entire sixteen chapters are but the start of the story of Jesus—a story that continues to unfold in the lives of Christ's followers even today. Nevertheless, since Mark offers readers no account of Jesus' origins prior to his official ministry, it might strike us as incongruous that we would have any use for the Gospel of Mark when celebrating Christmas.

Yet the Gospel of Mark does indeed have very important implications for this season of

incarnation, especially if we understand Christmas not merely as the birth of the baby Jesus but more broadly as the coming of Christ into our lives and world. However, be warned! Like a jolt of electricity, Mark's message about the coming of Christ should absolutely shock us from our often complacent and self-satisfied lives. Mark will not permit us the soothing, sentimentalized Christmas our cultures have created from the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke, nor will it let us reduce John's incarnational message into a set of abstract and remote ideas. For Mark, the coming of Christ is a thoroughly countercultural event, disrupting our lives and calling for an inversion of the prevailing social order. The Christmases we construct for ourselves often amount to a kind of passive adoration of the sweet smiling baby in the manger—a reverence that romanticizes the child and asks little from us. In Mark, however, the incarnate presence of God comes in the One who challenges the status quo, engages the harsh realities of our world, and summons his followers to join him in a costly kind of commitment.

The Jesus we meet in Mark is edgy and



confrontational, a Savior who challenges us and upends the state of our hearts and communities. While Mark's Gospel will not give us a conventional cozy Christmas message, through this Gospel we can discover a fresh understanding of the holiness of Christmas—the holiness found when God's transformative love is born in us.

This book is designed to be a companion through the four weeks of Advent and Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Each of the five chapters offers a reflection based on a different Markan theme and concludes with questions for group discussion or individual contemplation.

Chapter 1 explores Mark's idea of what it means to anticipate Christ's coming into the world. Chapter 2 examines what is really meant when we speak about the peace on earth that Christ brings. Chapter 3 focuses on our human longing for home and how God offers us a place of belonging in and through Christ. Chapter 4 explores Mark's unusual approach to the revelation of the Messiah. The final chapter examines Mark's concept of the incarnation, the hope we have in "God with us."

Mark gives us an unusual stack of gifts for Advent and Christmas: apocalyptic portents, open conflict, a new home filled with surprising relatives, a secret realm with its hidden Messiah, and the shadow of the cross. Such odd and disruptive gifts, to be sure! Yet sometimes the unconventional and unexpected gifts are the ones that bring deep meaning and lasting value. May your journey with the Gospel of Mark lead you to the Savior's abundant gifts.



## Chapter 1

# THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

## *Anticipating the Coming of Christ*

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.” (Mark 13:1–2)

“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.” (Mark 13:7–8)

“But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.” (Mark 13:14–19)

“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. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect

from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” (Mark 13:24–27)

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. 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, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mark 13:32–37)

HAROLD CAMPING, A CHRISTIAN RADIO entrepreneur, predicted that the world would come to an end on May 21, 2011. Through his examination of Scripture, Camping arrived at what he was certain would be the precise date of the apocalypse, also referred to as the second coming, when faithful Christians would ascend to heaven and nonbelievers would be destroyed in cataclysmic fires, earthquakes, and floods. Camping spent two years proclaiming his

doomsday message, raising tens of millions of dollars from his listeners to pay for five thousand billboards and millions of pamphlets translated into sixty-one languages. As the predicted date drew near, Camping and his forecast captured the attention of millions of people around the globe. Some people abruptly got married, quit their jobs, racked up credit card debts, threw lavish parties, and, tragically in some cases, committed suicide. No one was more stunned than Camping himself when on May 21, 2011, the world did *not* come to an end.

Advent is the season when Christians prepare for the coming of Christ. Most of us, however, associate this coming with the birth of Jesus. At Christmas we sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” and “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” anticipating the babe in the manger, *not* the catastrophic events of the second coming. Many of us would shake our heads in derision at people who are taken in by doomsday predictors like Camping. We don’t believe such prophetic pronouncements, and we have little use for the notion of an apocalypse. But then what do we make of the Gospel of Mark, especially

its troubling chapter 13? In this chapter Jesus *himself* talks about cataclysmic and cosmic disruptions and about the second coming of the Son of Humanity. How do we understand this unsettling pronouncement or the fact that Jesus is the one proclaiming the message?

The word *apocalypse* means “to reveal” or “to disclose.” The term is associated with the unveiling of cataclysmic events, specifically those marking the end of the world and the confrontation between good and evil. While Mark 13 contains obvious apocalyptic traits, many scholars maintain that all of Mark’s Gospel has an *eschatological* orientation—meaning that the entire Gospel deals with matters pertaining to the end times. This “end of the world” angle is most easily seen in Mark 13, which describes the disastrous events some believed would occur when God came to destroy the ruling powers of evil.

Biblical apocalyptic writings such as Mark 13, however, depict more than simply the end of the world; they reflect the belief in God’s righteous *reordering* of the world. An ending, yes, but an ending followed by a new beginning and



the establishment of a just and righteous reign. While the imagery is extreme, it was not necessarily intended to be taken literally. Rather, apocalyptic language was used impressionistically to convey the greatness of God's righteous intervention. Mark sees Jesus as God's appointed one whose intervention brings about the end of the world as we know it.

Chapter 13 is referred to as Mark's "Little Apocalypse," in contrast to the much longer apocalyptic writings found in the book of Revelation. Like most biblical apocalyptic literature, Mark 13 was written to bring hope and encouragement to people experiencing great tribulation. Those of us who enjoy comfortable lives of plenty will likely have a hard time regarding the end of the world as good news. However, for those people who experience great suffering and oppression, the end of their misery and the complete reordering of the world is regarded as something to anticipate and celebrate.

Mark wrote to a community facing such a situation. The context of Mark's Gospel is a harrowing story of unimaginable suffering. His Gospel was likely written around the time of the

Jewish uprising in 66–70 CE, when factions of the Jewish people rose up in revolt against the Roman occupation. The Jewish people greatly despised their Roman oppressors. Rome's excessive taxation on an already impoverished people fueled smoldering resentments. Hostilities also escalated due to various Roman indignities toward the Jewish people, including the command that they accept the divinity of the emperor and Rome's efforts to erect a statue of the emperor in the Jerusalem temple. Certainly Rome's notorious cruelty cemented the people's animosity. Severe reprisals followed any form of opposition. The commonplace sightings of crucified figures along the highways of ancient Palestine functioned to terrorize the populace into submission.

Despite Rome's military dominance, a segment of the Jewish people rose up in violent rebellion against this tyranny. However, not all of the Jewish people supported the insurrection, and the Jewish uprising against this foreign occupier morphed into a civil war. Some of the Jewish elite who served as collaborators with the Roman officials and who benefited

from the existing circumstances fiercely resisted the revolt. Other more moderate Jews withheld their support because they did not believe the revolt was winnable. These internal divisions took a shocking turn when the insurrectionists launched a massacre against those in their community who opposed the rebellion. At one point, as the Roman armies were amassed around Jerusalem's walls, holding the city under siege, a group of radical Zealots tried to force the resisters to join their side by burning the city's entire stockpile of food in an effort to eliminate any kind of security blanket. Some records indicate that the resulting starvation killed as many people as later would the Romans. The ancient historian Josephus recorded the great deprivation within Jerusalem's walls during the siege:

Then did the famine widen its progress, and devoured the people by whole houses and families; the upper rooms were full of women and children that were dying by famine, and the lanes of the city were full of the dead bodies of the aged; the children also and the young men wandered about the market-places like shadows, all swelled with the famine, and fell down dead, wheresoever their misery seized

them. As for burying them, those that were sick themselves were not able to do it; and those that were hearty and well were deterred from doing it by the great multitude of those dead bodies, and by the uncertainty there was how soon they should die themselves; for many died as they were burying others, and many went to their coffins before that fatal hour was come. Nor was there any lamentations made under these calamities, nor were heard any mournful complaints; but the famine confounded all natural passions; for those who were just going to die looked upon those that were gone to rest before them with dry eyes and open mouths. A deep silence also, and a kind of deadly night, had seized upon the city.<sup>1</sup>

When the Roman army finally breached the last wall surrounding Jerusalem, its soldiers unleashed a rampage of violence and destruction, burning buildings and slaughtering men, women, and children. It is estimated that one million Jewish people died in the revolt and its aftermath. Thousands of others were seized and enslaved. Then, in an ultimate act of retaliation, the Romans burned down the Jewish temple, a building that was not only a beloved house

of worship but was believed to be God's holy dwelling place on earth.

Mark wrote his Gospel either during or in the immediate aftermath of these disastrous events. The spiritual, psychological, and physical traumas experienced in the fall of Jerusalem form the subtext of his Gospel.

## APOCALYPSE NOW

Those of us in the United States might recall our own emotions during the 9/11 terrorist attacks: our horror as the buildings collapsed, our shock in learning about the deaths of thousands of ordinary citizens and first responders, our grief, our fear. An apocalypse had occurred. These tragic events unveiled the scope of tremendous evil in this world as well as the deep-seeded rage aimed at the West and the United States in particular, shattering our national and our personal sense of security.

Another kind of apocalypse took place during the global COVID-19 pandemic. During the early days of the pandemic, as schools and businesses abruptly shut down, city streets