

Semicontinuous

1 Sam. 1:4–20

1 Sam. 2:1–10

Complementary

Dan. 12:1–3

Ps. 16

Heb. 10:11–14,
(15–18,) 19–25

Mark 13:1–8

Focusing on the One to Come

Goal for the Session Adults will articulate the mission of the church in light of the signs of the apocalypse.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Mark 13:1–8

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Robert A. Bryant

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WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Emilie M. Townes

In keeping with other apocalyptic literature, Jesus uses signs and events of the day to signal the coming of the end of the current age. Yet with this end is the birth of the new age. Remarkably, in the midst of the predictions of destruction, if not annihilation, lie the seeds of salvation. It is rough sledding to help hearers of the Word continue in the midst of apocalyptic warnings once one knows that simplistic proclamations of humanity’s wickedness or craven faithfulness will simply not do. The theological heft of salvation loses its power with such appeals. Rather, we should explore how we move from darkness to light, from alienation to divine community, from guilt to pardon, from slavery to freedom, from the fear of hostile powers to liberty and assurance. In short, what it means is that through abiding faith, we receive salvation through God’s grace.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Rodger Y. Nishioka

Various groups have created their own versions of an end-time clock to tell us how close we are to Christ’s return. Some interpret each day’s events in light of this text, claiming some secret revelation about God’s plan for the last days. Jesus’ warning is more potent than ever. Certainly every generation has heard the voices of those who boldly claim that they are privy to insider knowledge about when Christ is returning. That is what makes the subject of the end times so attractive and so treacherous. We, like the disciples, can become so focused on discerning the signs of the times that we neglect our more important mission to witness to the gospel today.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Pete Peery

The Markan scholar Lamar Williamson reminds us that every Gospel writer leaves the church with a challenge. John calls the church to love one another. Matthew and Luke call the church to engage in mission to the Gentiles, to those who are “other.” These are daunting challenges. But perhaps the most daunting challenge for Christians in the North American context, so set on instant gratification, is this one left for us by Mark: “Beware, . . . keep awake,” watch, resist, hold out for the coming of Son of Man.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Mark 13:1–8

Focus on Your Teaching

Depending on the religious background of your participants, they may have been taught a variety of opinions about the end time. It is likely that most adults in your group have wondered about end-time predictions and if anyone knows when Jesus will come again. Every few years a person or movie makes news headlines about the discovery of how and when these things will happen. Every time this occurs, many Christians ask anew: Are there really clues in the Bible? Is there a way to read the signs of the times and know when Jesus might return?

Today's text offers the chance to discuss these questions and consider our reactions.

God of time eternal, teach me your priorities while I await your return. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

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- Bibles
- pens
- paper
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2 for September 26, 2015
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 22, 2015

For Responding:

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2 and pens
- option 2: magazines, tape or glue, paper, colored pencils, and crayons
- option 3: paper and colored markers, pencils or crayons, Resource Sheet 1

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, write the bulleted questions in Exploring on a piece of newsprint or the board.

Welcome participants as they arrive and welcome any newcomers.

Ask participants to recall what they remember of people or groups who have claimed to know the exact day when the world will end and Jesus will return. Several examples they may mention include:

- ✧ In 1836 John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, believed that the millenium began that year. He based his prediction on Revelation 12:14.
- ✧ Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) predicted Jesus would return by 1891.
- ✧ William Miller, a founder of the Adventist movement, claimed Jesus would return sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844.

Discuss people's feelings about end-time predictions. Ask:

- ✧ What is your reaction to end-time predictions?
- ✧ Why do you think people who predict end-time dates have followings?

Tell participants that in today's lesson Jesus talks about the end of time and how to live while waiting for it. Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

God of all time, open our hearts and minds to hear your word. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute the Outline of Mark's Gospel (Resource Sheet 2 for September 6, 2015) to anyone who needs a copy. Have participants locate Mark 13:1–8 on this outline. Confirm this is the last week to study the Gospel of Mark in this lectionary year, which ends next week.

As a group name themes people remember from the past weeks from the Gospel of Mark. Encourage people to recall any sermons that have touched on themes discussed in class.

Have a volunteer read Mark 13:1–8 and inform the group this entire chapter 13 is called the “little apocalypse” because its form and content resemble themes found in major apocalyptic writings in Daniel 7–12 and Revelation.

Form small groups of four persons and have them read Mark 13:1–36. Draw attention to newsprint or board with the following questions:

- ✧ When will the Son of Man return?
- ✧ What sorts of things will happen before he returns?
- ✧ How does Jesus describe the moment when he will return?
- ✧ What are faithful followers to do?

Have each group appoint a spokesperson who will report on their discussion. After ten minutes return as a large group and hear the reports from the groups.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Mark 13:1–8) and invite a participant to read the “What?” and the “Where?” excerpts aloud and ask:

- ✧ How can a time of destruction also be a time of beginning?
- ✧ Knowing that Mark wrote to a community being oppressed, how do you think these words gave hope?

As a transition to the next section, have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt. Ask for examples of how the church today should watch and focus on the one to come rather than focus on the signs of the end of time.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Responding to End-Time Predictions** This activity gives participants a chance to consider how they might respond to end-time predictions when they hear them. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Scenarios of End-Time Predictions) and a pen to each participant. Work alone or in small groups to answer one or more of the cases given. Encourage participants to not only focus on why the prediction may be wrong, but to also suggest what Christians are to do while they wait for Jesus’ return.

After five minutes, return as a large group and invite volunteers to give brief reports of how they would respond to each scenario.

- 2. The Church’s Mission** One way to focus on what we are to do while waiting for the One who is to come is to visualize the church’s mission. Distribute magazines or newspapers with contemporary pictures of disasters, war, or human pain. Also provide paper and coloring pens or pencils. Invite participants to work alone or in small groups and use the materials to create a graphic that shows chaos and destruction surrounding the church

Similar chapters are found in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. If there is interest, suggest that participants use the questions here to compare all three Gospels.

**EASY
PREP**

while the church goes forward in its mission. Have them write a brief description of the church's mission while waiting for Christ's return. Consider posting the graphics in the classroom or a place in church where all can see.

- 3. Bumper Stickers** Condensing the church's mission to a bumper sticker slogan can help participants articulate important lessons in few words. Distribute paper and colored markers, pencils, or crayons to participants and have a volunteer read the "Now What?" excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Invite participants to come up with a phrase or word that summarizes the church's mission that can fit on a bumper sticker. Have them use the colored markers and paper to make a bumper sticker using that phrase or word. After a few minutes invite them to show their bumper stickers to one another. Consider making a collage of them and posting them in the room or somewhere visible in the church.

CLOSING

Invite participants to offer summaries of what they learned from Mark 13:1–8 for their faith lives. Remind them that apocalyptic literature is written for people who are suffering from persecution, giving them hope for God's return and encouraging them in their mission. Lead the following responsive prayer. Explain that petitions will end with you saying, "We will endure and share your good news," and they will respond, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Gracious God, we thank you for coming into this suffering world and teaching us how to love you and love others. We will endure and share your good news . . .
Come, Lord Jesus.

Earthquakes cause the earth to tremble, famine kills innocent people, senseless wars seem to never end. You say this is the beginning of the birth pangs. We will endure and share your good news . . .
Come, Lord Jesus.

Some people attempt to interpret current wars and disasters as sure signs of the end. They say the hour is known. Yet, we will endure and share your good news . . .
Come, Lord Jesus.

Many false prophets come in your name, promising to speak for you, leading many astray. We will endure and share your good news . . .
Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus, end all suffering and injustice as you promised. Until then we will spread your news of justice and peace, of compassion for the weak. We will endure and share your good news . . .
Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 22, 2015, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Focus on Mark 13:1–8

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Scenarios of End-Time Predictions

Choose one or more of these case studies and write some notes about how you might respond to them. If possible, write out a Bible verse to back you up. For example, in Mark 13:32 Jesus says that no one knows the hour when he will return. In each response include what followers of Christ are to do while waiting for Jesus to come.

The Street Corner Preacher

While you are waiting for a bus a young man is holding a Bible and preaching loudly to the captive crowd. He claims to be anointed by God and has been told by God that the end of time is very near. He begins to list all the latest wars and diseases and sins of humankind that prove the biblical verses he cites. According to his careful biblical calculation, a world war will begin soon in the Middle East. When it is finished, Jesus will come again.

Based on today's reading, how might you respond to someone in the crowd who asks you if this is true?

Questions about "Left Behind"

A friend of yours at church has been reading the Left Behind series. She is fascinated about what will happen after Jesus returns and who will be saved and who will be left behind. She also spends considerable time trying to discern which current events are mentioned in the Bible that might be precursors to igniting the end of time.

Based on Mark 13, how might you respond to her?

Youth's Questions

A middle-school child in the church tells you one of his classmates said the world will end next year. The classmate said the Bible is a secret codebook and Jesus left concise instructions in it which, if carefully studied, prove when the world will end. The classmate's Sunday school teacher also said the world will end sometime next year.

Based on Mark 13, how might you respond to the youth?