

“Silver Linings”  
Mark 13: 1-8  
*Delivered at The United Church  
Los Alamos, New Mexico  
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I want to wish you a very happy Thanksgiving! Thanksgiving Day is a recent holiday although thanksgiving festivals can be found all through history. The first U.S. Thanksgiving was proclaimed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Congress and had to be proclaimed every year anew. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Abraham Lincoln declared a national day of Thanksgiving in November to honor the victory at Gettysburg. Needless to say Southern states did not go along. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century during President Franklin Roosevelt’s time the current date was fixed by an act of Congress after much debate.

The historical story behind our Thanksgiving celebration is a remembrance of a thanksgiving feast held by the Pilgrims and Native Americans in 17<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts. That celebration most likely occurred in October rather than November and was a feast to offer thanks for the year’s harvest.

Most cultures have some type of thanksgiving celebration normally to celebrate the annual harvest. The Hebrews had several different feasts of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was an important spiritual attitude reflected in many of the Psalms and other Old Testament books. Jesus also carried the idea of thankfulness into his ministry and that attitude was picked up by early Christians. Thanksgiving is a spiritual attitude

that is not totally dependent on the circumstances of life. Thus, Paul could give thanks because of his salvation even when the conditions of his life were less than desirable.

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The text for today seems at first glance inappropriate for a sermon on thanksgiving. The text comes during the last week of Jesus' life when he and his disciples are in Jerusalem. The disciples are in awe of this great city. King Herod had started a renovation project of the Temple and the Temple was looking magnificent. Most Jews took pride in the city of Jerusalem and were taking pride in the new look of the Temple. All of us can understand the feelings that many were sharing. "Look", the disciples exclaim to Jesus, "what large stones and what large buildings!"

But Jesus asks them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." What a downer!

Then later when the disciples and Jesus were continuing to take in the sights they were sitting on the Mount of Olives enjoying the view. Three disciples ask Jesus privately about what he had said---they were bothered by his doom and gloom attitude. So Jesus responded, "Beware that no one leads you astray." A strange answer to their question, don't you think?

Jesus continues, “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many 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.” Happy Thanksgiving!!!!

-2-

Such texts like this come up as the liturgical year is ending. Whenever such texts come up there are several reactions. One reaction is to join the “lucrative doomsday machine” as Robin Meyers calls it.<sup>1</sup> Here we can frighten people with images of God’s wrath and destruction, scaring the “hell” out of them as one television preacher puts it. There is big-money in preaching the end-times. Fred Craddock is quoted as saying, “Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming because, deep down they were really disappointed in the first one.”<sup>2</sup>

That sentiment may be a part of more of us than we realize. Who has not truly longed for a God of judgment especially with so many

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<sup>1</sup> “In Praise of the First Coming”, by Robin R. Meyers, [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

wrongs going unpunished? Who among us<sup>3</sup> does not hope that some day “they”---whoever they are---will get theirs---whatever that is?

For those who have struggled as I have with the computer program “Windows” there is joke about when Bill Gates died and went before God. God was confused about whether to send Bill to heaven or hell. God pointed out how Bill had really helped society by putting a computer in almost every home but then God reminded Bill about his ghastly creation of Windows 95. So God decided to let Bill Gates decide.

So Bill decided to try Hell out first. When he got there he saw a beautiful clean beach, clear waters and thousands of beautiful women. The sun was shining and the temperature was perfect. “This is great”, Bill told God, but if this is Hell I really want to see heaven!”

So Bill went to heaven and saw that it was a place high in the clouds, angels drifting around playing harps and singing. It was nice but not as nice as Hell so Bill Gates decided to go to Hell.

Some time later God decided to check up on the late billionaire to see how he was doing. God found him in Hell, chained to a wall, screaming among the hot flames. “How is everything?” God asked. Bill responded, his voice filled with anguish and disappointment, “This is awful, this is not what I expected. What happened to the other place with the beaches and beautiful women?”

“Oh,” said God, “that was the screen saver!”

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<sup>3</sup> There are several versions of this joke. Most end the joke with the phrase from God or St. Peter “That was the demo”. This version can be found at [www.planetmike.com](http://www.planetmike.com).

There are many of us who hold a desire to see justice done and those who have done us wrong to be punished. During times when people are not feeling good about life or the future apocalyptic writings flourish. With all the violence, with all the changes going on, with the real fears of terrorism or global warming is it any wonder that in both the secular and religious worlds many have turned to end of the world predictions. Many of the best selling books are about predictions about when and how the world is to end. Many of the most popular movies such as the remake of “War of the Worlds” contain apocalyptic themes.

Jesus was aware of this and warned his followers that many would come claiming to know the future but true followers were to be wary of such persons and such predictions. The world, Jesus said, would conclude in God’s time and in God’s way. So in one sense this was a positive spin on a very negative subject---a silver lining.

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In the time that the Gospel of Mark was composed things were looking very bleak. Most scholars date Mark after the fateful year of 70 A.D. In that year Roman legions breached the walls of Jerusalem, stormed the city, and completely destroyed the Great Temple—the same one Jesus and his disciples had viewed decades earlier. The Jews, filled with visions of greatness, had revolted against Rome and saw God’s hand in establishing a Jewish Kingdom once again. It was not to be.

The second destruction of the Great Temple was a spiritual earthquake that shook the religious foundations of many. How could God allow this to happen? Was it the beginning of the end of the world? I am sure that in Mark's time there were many who were saying just that. Mark recalls for them the words of Jesus predicting the destruction of the Temple but warning followers to not make more of it than they should. So Mark in a sense is saying that even in the hard times of his time Christians should be a people of hope---a silver lining.

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The phrase, "Every cloud has a silver lining" originated with John Milton's masque, "Comus" published in 1634. The exact phrase was, "Was I deceiv'd, or did a sable cloud/Turn forth her silver lining on the night?" Later, Charles Dickens in his novel "Bleak House" published in 1852 quoted the Milton line with "I turn my silver lining outward like Milton's cloud". Finally it was P.T. Barnum who first recorded the saying, "Every cloud has a silver lining" in his work "Struggles and Triumphs" published in 1869.<sup>4</sup>

The phrase means that there is good in every tragedy like the line reflected sunlight along a storm cloud. The phrase is similar to one that the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him". A variation of the text is

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<sup>4</sup> "Of Quoted Lines" by Bob Ames, 2006, <http://bullets-and-bear.com/Ofquote.htm>.

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God.”

The idea is that God is at work in the world and that even tragedy and misfortune has within it a hidden gift or a hidden possibility. It is this hidden possibility that leads us to be thankful even when circumstances are such that thankfulness seems inappropriate.

In the case of Christians in Mark’s time no one was thankful for the destruction of the Temple, for the thousands of deaths that resulted from the Jewish revolt, or from the subsequent persecution of Jews and Christians that was carried forth by Rome. Yet, two things emerged from that tragedy.

First most scholars believe that the destruction of Jerusalem forced Christians to spread out across the world bringing with them the gospel message. Second, the removal of the Temple once and for all moved both Judaism and Christianity in a more spiritual direction. Any future “temple” would be within the heart and not brick and mortar. Yet, that tension between religion rooted in structure and rooted in the heart continues today.

For the pilgrims the celebration of thanksgiving was an act of faith even in the face of tragedy. English separatists first fled England and settled in Holland to escape persecution. The Pilgrims were not Puritans but a separate group of Christians who together with the Puritans challenged the religious authority in England.

The Scooby congregation of Separatists fled England for Holland in the early 1600s. Settling finally in Leyden the group flourished and grew to a congregation of over 300. Yet, some within the congregation yearned for a move to the New World or to Africa where they could practice their beliefs in freedom. Finally in 1620 a small group from the Leyden congregation set sail for the New World intending to go to New Amsterdam. After a rough journey the ship landed at Cape Cod on November 9, 1620.

The first winter was harsh and many of the settlers died. One, the wife of William Bradford is believed to have committed suicide because she was so depressed about being far from home and in a strange land. Ironically, the Pilgrims survived by their discovery and confiscation of Native American food caches. The Pilgrim's believed God had provided the food---the Native Americans wondered about these strange people who so easily took what was not theirs.

It was the Native Americans who made the first move of peace when Squanto one day greeted the cautious and suffering settlers. Squanto was a baptized Christian who had been educated in England and thus had an understanding and appreciation for the Pilgrims.

That spring and summer the Native Americans taught the pilgrims how to plant corn, how to recognize edible plants, and how to build wigwams. The harvest was good. The Mayflower returned to Europe leaving the Pilgrims truly alone. They faced another hard winter and

possibly more deaths. Yet, the Pilgrims decided that the time was right for a celebration---a festival of Thanksgiving to God for all their blessings. They were able to see the silver lining in the dark clouds.

So Captain Miles Standish invited Squanto, Samoset, Massasoit (the leader) and their immediate families to join them in the celebration. However, the pilgrims had no idea how large Native American families were. Some ninety relatives of Squanto and Samoset arrived. The Pilgrims were not prepared for so many people. Seeing this Massasoit gave orders to his men to go back and get more food. Thus, most of the food for the first Thanksgiving was provided by the Native Americans.

For three days the two groups feasted. Interestingly the Native Americans thought it a strange custom that the Pilgrims had for the men to eat first and the women later. Native American families all ate together. Yet, in spite of cultural differences the two groups celebrated for three days and ended with a peace agreement.

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We have many blessings and many gifts. Yet, even if life is not perfect---even if there are things we do not have or wish to have---we can still be thankful. Even if dark clouds seem to be gathering and we seem to be in an age of growing danger and darkness---God is still working and speaking. So too we can be thankful that God is among us, working, healing, leading and that there is a silver lining to dark clouds

or as Paul writes, God works to bring Good out of all things. Have a Happy Thanksgiving. Amen.