



LOOK! OVER THERE!

Mark 13:1-8



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I was on a mission trip one time with my youth group in Florida, and, as often happens, some kids finished with their day's work before the others. My friend John, the other adult leader, volunteered to wait with the few teenagers that got back first. I walked in a few minutes later – while the group was still pretty small, and pretty soon John was telling me that I should 'test' Joe -- one of the 8th graders.

They sent me up to the whiteboard where they had drawn a rough square, cut into nine smaller squares. Joe left the room and John said, "Pick a square." So I did.

We called young Joe back in and everybody watched as he stood "first upon one foot, then upon the other" -- as my mom would say -- and pondered the white board for a minute. I watched him very closely and it didn't take long before Joe, one eyebrow lifterd, pointed to the very square I had picked out when he was out of the room.

We did it again. And, once again, Joe guessed it right. We tried it again. And again, and Joe got it right every single time. More students got back from working and before long they all engaged in 'testing' Joe. Time after time Joe chose the square they had pointed to in secret while he was out of the room. Others tried to duplicate Joes' skill with no success. I was particularly entertained by one boy who thought if stood and shifted his weight just like Joe did, tilted his head just like Joe did, and tapped his leg just like Joe tapped his, he'd be able to figure out which square had been chosen. Of course he couldn't.

Now, I'm generally pretty much of a skeptic – jaded ... cynical. You know, fool me once, shame on you....? I knew there was a trick to it – I just knew it, but for the life of me I couldn't figure it out.

After we did our closing blessing and the students had all gone to bed, John finally let me in on the trick. Every time Joe came back into the room, he snuck a quick glance at John, and John would give him a signal signal for what square to pick. Well, I never looked at my "friend" John – why would I? And somehow, I never noticed Joe stealing a glance at John before putting on his little show of thinking and studying the board in front of him. I had been looking the other way. It was a classic misdirection; I never saw what had been right in front of me the whole time.

Let's face it. Apocalyptic passages like this one are weird, a little bit off-putting, and hard to preach about – even if you're familiar with the genre. But let's think for a minute. We may not be intimately familiar with the apocalyptic worldview, but I think we do know a little something about it. It wasn't that long

ago, after all that there were billboards everywhere and news stories about that Christian radio evangelist Harold Camping's predictions of the rapture in 2011 – remember? Then we had the Mayan prediction of the end of the world on December 21, 2012? It made for great disaster movie. It had a little of everything – floods, earthquakes, fires....

And I suppose we can stretch the category a little and include the Y2K scare predicting the end of the world as we know it because for some reason none of our technology could make the change from 1999 to 2000. There were all kinds of books and advice on how to deal with that. And there are still people out there who are hunkered down in bunkers – ready and waiting to survive the apocalypse.

So maybe we're more familiar with the apocalyptic worldview than we thought. Who's read *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins? (All 13 volumes?)

The question then, is what drives authors – both in biblical times and today – to want to look into the future and describe the end of the world. The answer, I think, is the belief that knowing the future seems to shed a little light on the problems of the present. But more than that, knowing the unknown provides a small measure of relief from those problems. I remember feeling so relieved when my pastor told us that the book of Revelation is more a book of hope than it is a book about the end of the world.

Bear in mind the book of Mark was probably written around 66–70 CE, during [Nero's](#) persecution of the Christians in Rome and the Jewish revolt. Passages like this one, that mention the destruction of the temple are used by scholars to date the authorship of the book.

Today's passage was probably not intended to give us concrete information about Jesus' triumphant return or the end of the world – let alone an actual timeline – but to provide some hope for the 1st century Markan community and some insight into some of the challenges they were facing.

These challenges might include things like disappointment in the delayed return of Jesus; or the huge social and religious upheaval caused by the destruction of the temple; or the persecution by both secular and religious forces. And there was probably some confusion among the community about whether or not Jesus had already returned and if they had missed it! Life was hard for the early Christians and the author of Mark uses the traditions and symbols of the apocalyptic genre to provide perspective as well as comfort to the community.

Now, as I mentioned, this isn't as far flung for us as you might think. Mark uses several images that can help us find some relevance to our own lives in 2015. The one that really grabs me this week is the warning that many will come claiming

to be Jesus in order to lead us astray – kind of like false idols -- distractions and misdirection.

Historically, this warning could indicate that defection was a real problem for the community back then. For us, I doubt that some new charismatic leader will tempt many of us away from our comfortable UMC family. However, that said, let's be honest – there's no shortage of things in life trying to claim our allegiance, promising salvation.

Maybe it's the lure of wealth and possessions that's constantly in competition for our attention. Maybe it's the promise of a raise or a promotion at work; or acceptance by a cool social group. It could be the dream of the perfect relationship with that special someone who values and cares for you.

It could be a smaller temptation: like being the perfect friend or sibling – and somebody noticing; or being really good at something – and somebody noticing. Or maybe it's something to get angry about in world of privilege – like a coffee cup.

Maybe you heard about this – last weekend, Starbucks introduced their new holiday cups, and what I'm about to show you is highly offensive, brace yourselves. Here it is. People are angry about this cup, because they are saying Starbucks is being anti-Christmas. You see, the old cups had snowflakes and Santa's sleigh and elves -- all the things that you find in the Bible. Now, they're just red. Look at this cup. As Ellen says, "You might as well call it a 'Satan sipper.'

People are so upset that Starbucks had to release an official statement about their cups. They said that belonging, inclusion, and diversity are the core values of Starbucks, and Starbucks wants to give customers an experience that inspires the spirit of the season. The nerve!

How did we become so distracted from Jesus' original message. Remember? Jesus told us to love God and to love each other. To love our neighbor. And we have learned that our neighbor is -- well – everybody.

Now let me say that none of these misdirections – these temptations that lure us away from Jesus' teachings is a bad thing in and of itself.

Except the coffee cup thing – it's petty and a waste of valuable time and energy that could be used for – oh I don't know – loving our neighbor...?

There's really nothing wrong with wanting the best for your self and your children. It's admirable. It's natural to want to belong or to be in a relationship, and I think a lot of good can be achieved through these desires. But they all can become a distraction, can't they, and tempt us away from our responsibilities as Christ-followers.

And, of course, none of them can live up to their promise. They can't save us. They don't provide happiness -- or that peace that passes understanding. They can't bear the weight of meaning that we unconsciously ask of them -- that we desperately yearn for. But in our confusion, or insecurity -- or maybe a little of both -- just like Mark's first century community, we too crave a level of certainty and security, so we take these God-given gifts and turn them into, well... God.

I think that's part of the human condition -- worshipping the gifts of God rather than the Giver. Maybe that's one thing we can glean from this passage today: in times of confusion, challenge and distress, we mustn't be distracted, impressed, or misdirected by the symbols of power that are all around us -- "Teacher, look how big these stones are!"

In closing I want to share this little story with you about a boy who was understandably distracted:

A volunteer tutor was asked to visit a nine-year-old in a large city hospital. She took the boy's name and room number and was told by the boy's teacher that they were studying nouns and adverbs in class. It wasn't until the tutor got to the boy's room that she realized the boy was a patient in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a nine-year-old so horribly burned and in such great pain. She felt she couldn't just turn and leave, so gathered her courage and entered the room.

"Hi, I'm the hospital teacher," she stammered. "Your teacher asked me to help you with nouns and adverbs." And, clumsily, she launched into the lesson.

The next morning a nurse called the tutor. "What did you do to that boy?" The tutor immediately began a tearful apology, but the nurse interrupted her.

"No, no, no. You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But since you were here, he's fighting back, he's responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

The boy explained that he had given up hope, until the tutor came. "I figured they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a kid who's dying, would they?"

As they say, "It'll all be ok in the end. If it's not ok, it's not the end."

Amen.