

Keep Watch: Deliverance is on the Way

Psalm 80:1-7,17-19

Mark 13:21-37

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One Sunday, when I was about four years old, during the blessing of the children, the pastor asked if any of us kids knew a poem about Jesus with hand motions. My hand shot up. I knew a poem about Jesus! My mom had taught me this poem about the passion story with three crosses on the hill called calvary. When the pastor called on me, I recited the entire poem, quite proud of the knowledge I had. When I finished, the pastor nodded, thanked me for the recitation, and informed me that he was not talking about that poem. The congregation laughed and I was quite embarrassed. However, after the service, when we were leaving the sanctuary, the pastor stopped my family and said that one day, he would be sitting in one of my congregations.

My mom first told me that story when I was about 14 or 15 years old, and it was my turn to laugh. I was just starting to entertain my calling to ministry after it became painfully obvious that I hated biology and would not be a doctor after taking pre-ap Biology. However, I was NOT going to be a pastor. I had this vision of what a good pastor should be, and I am not it. A pastor would be patient and would always have the right thing to say. A pastor would be mild mannered and polite all the time. A pastor should be this representation of the Church that I was simply not cut out for. Nope, not me. God should pick someone better, someone with something more profound to say, someone with more patience, someone else.

The people of the first century also had their own expectations of the ways that God should work in their midst and of the people God should use. But before we get into that, we should look at the background that sets the stage for what God's people of the first century expected from the presence of God among them.

Ancient Israelites were no strangers to occupation and marginalization. Throughout their history, the people of God knew all too well the pain of life under an oppressive, occupying empire. In fact, Psalm 80 is believed to be a Psalm that potentially comes from the exilic period between 597 and 538 BCE, where Israel was taken over, the first Temple was destroyed, and the Israelites were forced to leave Judah and live under captivity in Babylon. As biblical scholar, Lamar Williamson, puts it Psalm 80 "belongs to the repertoire of the afflicted people of God on their way through the troubles of history."¹

Fast forward about 400 years, and the Israelites found themselves in a similar situation with a new occupying power. Israel was taken over by the Seleucid Empire. Upon conquering Israel, King Antiochus IV, implemented a series of edicts that made the practice of Judaism a capital crime. Jews were no longer allowed to keep the Sabbath, read from the Torah, celebrate their feasts or offer sacrifices in the Temple. They were not even allowed to keep their Jewish names. But, this is not where he stopped. Antiochus also attempted to introduce pagan rites in

¹Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pg264.

Jerusalem, sacrificing a pig in the Temple, desecrating the holiest space in Judaism and making it unclean. To boot, Antiochus insisted people call him, Epiphanes, meaning God manifest. Under Antiochus's rule, the Jews were succumbed to the absolute worst of humanity. Those who did not denounce their faith were horribly tortured and killed. Jews watched as their neighbors, friends, family, children were slaughtered under this oppressive empire. Things were dark for the people of God, and it would have been easy to lose hope in God's presence among them.

However, this time around Israel expected the presence of God among them, a Messiah, who would set them free from the bondage of a conquering empire by any force necessary. There was a messianic expectation that this person would be a new David and would re-establish the kingdom of Israel in all of its glory. They wanted a warrior and the redemption of their earthly reign. In walks, The Maccabeus family. In 167 BCE, Matthias Maccabeus kills a Jewish man who was sacrificing to Zeus on the Temple altar in Jerusalem, sparking a revolt. The Jewish man who was sacrificing at the Temple, did not believe in Zeus but had made the decision that in order to save his own life, he would compromise his belief, and Matthias attacks him, not the Greeks who made this man come to this decision. In the midst of the revolt, Matthias' son, Judas proved to be a powerful and successful leader. Judas Maccabeus won several victories over the Syrian Greek armies, and in 164 BCE, they win. They reoccupy the Temple, rebuild the altar, and rededicate the Temple with a feast called Hanukkah.

This is what Israel expected out of their Messiah. A sword. Strength. Victories in Battle. Power. But, God's restoration is stronger than our thirst for violence and revenge. The people of God cry out that they want justice, and almost every ounce of humanity in me agrees with them. But, God's love is not just. God's love is righteous. God does not give humanity what it is due. Thankfully, God appears in ways we do not expect.

That brings us back to Psalm 80. This is a community prayer for the restoration of the people of Israel who feel as though God has abandoned them during their oppression. When Israel implores God to "Give ear" and "Stir up your might," they are petitioning God to hear them and help, implying that the people of Israel believe God is inattentive and absent amid their struggles. But, what if that was not the case? What if God is showing up in ways that the people could not see because it did not meet their expectations? The people cried out to God to "restore" them because they believed God was gone. But what if God was restoring them, working in ways that they did not see because they were looking in the wrong places, overlooking the still small voice of restoration.

However, even in the pits of their immense oppression and in their feelings of abandonment and isolation from God, Israel had the audacity to proclaim that God reigns even though they did not see it. This prayer is "an act of faith, and because the people trusted God to transform their circumstances and restore them, this act of faith was also an act of hope."² That even though they didn't see it, God would provide. And "Like those who prayed Psalm 80 long ago, [we must also continue to] dare to see and expect the reign of God where others see only chaos and expect nothing."³ God does not abandon us. Ever. In the midst of pain, suffering, loss, and death, God is there, walking beside us offering the good news of restoration. God is there in

² McAnn, J. Clinton. *The new interpreter's bible commentary*. Vol. 3. 12 vols. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015, pg.1001.

³ McAnn, 1001.

the midst of our pain. God is there in the midst of your pain, your loss, your hurt. And it's hard, but we must look for God's voice through it all.

But, how do we know what voices to listen to? What makes a prophet? That leads us to our passage from Mark 13. In his commentary on Mark, Joel Marcus notes that we first hear language of a false prophet in what is called the "Mosaic Warning" in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 which "speaks of a prophet who hopes to gain credence through a 'sign or wonder.'"⁴ Later, Jewish literature connected these false prophets to Moses, naming them "imitators of the true prophet Moses...and of his successor, the expected prophet-like Moses"⁵ Joel Marcus proposed that "this mosaic background may be a link with the Markan situation in the Jewish War, since some Jewish revolutionaries viewed their mission as a reprise of Moses' liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage."⁶ Basically, the term false prophets stems from Deuteronomy in connection with those people who tried to be the "next Moses," and in Mark's context, some Jewish revolutionaries viewed their mission as a reprise of Moses' work to free the people of Israel from Egypt, but the Jewish understanding would have been that these prophets were false because their "signs and wonders" do not stem from God.

The warning against false prophets is deeply rooted in the reality of the first century. Josephus, an incredibly influential Jewish historian of the first century, described the false prophets as "deceivers and imposters [who] under the pretense of divine inspiration fostering revolutionary changes... persuaded the multitude to act like madmen."⁷ Josephus describes the miracles of the "false prophets" as relating "to hopes for military victory against the Romans through the direct intervention of God."⁸ So often, we want God to show up and fit into our earthly understanding of justice, redemption through conquest and power, restoration through violence, but God shows up where we least expect and in ways we do not anticipate. We expect God to help us fight battles that God wants nothing to do with. We impose our earthly understanding of borders and conflict on God with a thirst for violence, but the God of perfect love is bigger than that. God is bigger than conquest. God does not care about our borders, or our kingdoms and empires, our businesses, or our profits. God deeply cares about people. God's love, mercy, and grace extends to people not institutions. We can see a "false prophet" in our midst by the message they bring. They do not proclaim the good news that God is among us always. They do not place their hope in the God of the universe but in the sword.

It is hard to know what messages and voices are trustworthy. That is why we must "beware [and] keep watch." God is at work around us everywhere. The good news is here and present among us. I believe that with my whole heart. In the midst of pain and hardship, in darkness and despair, God is abundant. There are voices that will try to convince us of the depravity of the world, of the hopelessness of your situation, of the doubt in goodness that has yet to come, but we have hope. "There is no better way to express belief in the reality of God's sovereignty than to address God out of our individual and corporate afflictions and to continue

⁴ Marcus, Joel. 2000. *Mark 8-16*. The Anchor Bible. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press. <https://search-ebscohost-com.wesleyseminarylibrary.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=302234&site=eds-live>, 898.

⁵ Marcus, 898.

⁶ Marcus, 899.

⁷ Marcus, 901.

⁸ Marcus, 901.

looking to God as the only source of light and life.”⁹ When all seems lost or destroyed, we rest assured in our covenant with the God of the universe. We know the prophets in our midst by the relentless hope they employ.

The world is a dark place. There is pain and suffering everywhere. But we are set apart not because of anything we have done or will do but because we have hope. Not just some cheap hope that everything will be butterflies and rainbows. No, we have hope with teeth, hope that is hard won, hope that looks into total darkness and is not overcome by it, hope that stares death in the face and promises life.

Our expectations of the ways God shows up in our lives are not always where God truly is. I had and continue to have expectations of who God should call to ministry instead of me, and yet, I continue to feel God’s persistent call on my life, even when I do not want to. God shows up for us and works for and in us, not because we are the right messengers, but because God’s love is perfect, providing a relentless hope that we are called to share with the world.

Amen.

⁹ McAnn, 1001.