*NEED TO KNOW BASIS*

Mark 13:1-8

November 14, 2021

Where did we get the phrase “need-to-know basis”?

The expression probably has military origins. When the government or the military believes that certain information is extremely sensitive, the files are placed under severe restrictions. Access to the information is limited only to a few people who absolutely “need to know” in order to fulfill their responsibilities.

But “need-to- know basis” exits in other areas of life as well For example *wiseGEEK* (a website) tells us that “when authorized engravers work on a new set of printing plates to produce government currency, each engraver receives only a section of the finished design. In this way, no single engraver ever sees the entire printing plate, so he or she could not be coerced into reproducing it for counterfeiters.”

Neither do parents—to cite another example—tell their children everything. They don’t want their children to be burdened or to worry about things children should not worry about.

And God, likewise, does not tell you and me everything, perhaps for similar reasons. We’re on a need-to-know basis.

In Acts 1:7, Jesus tells His disciples that there are some things they do not need to know. “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority.”

But here’s the thing: Sometimes we DO need to know!

In today’s text, clearly, the disciples do need to know. But what do they need to know?

They had been in the temple together. It is possible that the disciples had never been to the big city before. This might have been their first trip to Jerusalem. They probably had not wandered far from the Sea of Galilee, which gave them their livelihood. So, when you take country kids to the city for the first time, or bring some simple fishermen down from the rural north, you’re going to get kids or fishermen who are mightily impressed with what they see.

All of the disciples were impressed. “Look at these buildings! So cool! Look at this temple! And the size of the blocks of granite! Wow! (Josephus tells us that the blocks of granite that made up the temple wall were 40 feet long by 12 feet tall, by 18 feet wide. Think of the weight of those things and of fitting them into place. Wow. And Josephus tells us that the outside walls of the temple were overlaid with gold, so that when it was seen from afar, the temple shone like the sun itself. Wow.)

Jesus was not impressed. Of course, He’d been to the temple before and had even held a seminar there at the age of 12 for some of the most learned rabbis of the country. Jesus told the disciples that the temple was just a heap of rocks. “Yes, these buildings and stones are huge, but I will let you in on a secret. The day is coming when not a stone will be left untouched. This place is going down.”

After this comment, the disciples and Jesus continued on their way. But when they reached the Mount of Olives, four of the disciples—Peter, James, John, and Andrew—took Jesus aside and away from the others (perhaps they thought the other disciples did not need to know), and they asked Him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”

So Jesus begins to share what He knows and what He feels these four disciples are ready to hear.

Our reading is only a small part of what Jesus says to them. Here’s how He begins: “Beware that no one leads you astray. 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” (vv. 5-8).

Thomas Long, former Professor of Preaching at Princeton Seminary, and now Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University says, “It helps, I think, to remember that . . . apocalyptic language . . . is a vocabulary, a form of intense poetry really, that the gospel writers trotted out when they were trying to say what simply could not be said in everyday speech. When we enter the world of apocalyptic, we leave ordinary, literal description behind, and enter the world of metaphorical religious imagination. As biblical scholar John   
Barton noted, ‘We know that a text which began, ‘the stars will fall from heaven and the sun will cease its shining, the moon will be turned to blood’ . . . will not be likely to continue, ‘The rest of the country will have sunny intervals and scattered showers.’”

Received this way, the portrayal of the Second Coming . . is almost unimaginable good news. It announces that the ultimate end of all things is not some tinhorn human dictatorship, but Jesus Christ the Saviour. History does not end in a whimper, but in redemption. Standing there in glory at the conclusion of all things is not the evil of Hitler, nor the greed of Wall Street, nor the pride of our own egos, but the Son of Man. Those who try to bend history toward horror and holocaust do not get to tell the end of the story. The end of the story is the mercy of God.”

So. At this point, what do the disciples need to know? What do we need to know?

*We need to know that false shepherds do exist*. False shepherds are always lurking—looking for sheep to fleece. Their selling point? That whereas most of us are on a need-to-know basis, they are not. They are among God’s inner circle and therefore have access to knowledge no one else has. But, they croon, we too can know what they know. Be cautious, Jesus says. What you need to know is that no one knows more than you do right now. He will later say that neither He nor the angels know what is known only to God. Be careful about signing on with a charismatic leader who claims to have knowledge no one else has.

*We need to know that faithfulness to God is not about buildings, regardless of their size*. The temple was beautiful. No doubt about it. But the temple of stone and marble and gold was destroyed. All that remains is a wall. Yet, the church of Jesus Christ is alive and well. We may worship in buildings, but God does not live in buildings made by human hands. God dwells *everywhere*, not least in the human heart.

*We need to know that our faith is linear*. In other words, our faith is not circular. Life doesn’t keep going round and round in meaningless and repetitious rounds of suffering and despair. Rather, it is headed toward a culminating point—a point about which we know very little. There was a beginning, and there is an end point. God did not create us and the world in which we live to languish indefinitely with the consequences of our sin. God is a God of history. God is going to wrap things up. This is our hope. Jesus told the disciples that when the temple comes down, it is not the end, but the beginning of “birth pangs”. The end is still to come, and then a new beginning.

*We need to know that there is no cause for alarm*. Sometimes when everything is falling apart, coming down, things are really, for the first time, coming together.

Father Michael March writes, “I remember the morning of my divorce. I remember the afternoon my younger son called and said, ‘Dad, I just joined the Marines!’ I remember the night my older son died. With each of those events one of the great buildings of my life was thrown down. Stones that I had so carefully placed and upon which I had built my life no longer stood one upon another. Temples of my world had fallen. My world had changed and my life would be different.”

He goes on to write that we all build temples, and many of them come crashing down. Jesus reminds us that in the midst of the rubble, God is standing there and prepared to help us rebuild. Our God is a redeemer!

And what don’t we need to know?

Well, for example, the Russians partied so hard when World War II ended that the entire city of Moscow ran out of vodka. Don’t need to know that.

You once held a world record when you were born for being the “youngest person on the planet.” Don’t need to know that either.

The world’s tallest building—Burj Khalifa—is so tall that, after seeing the sunset at ground level, you can grab an elevator to the observation deck at the top and watch the sunset again! Don’t really need to know that, do we?

And we don’t need to know when Jesus is coming again. If we did need to know, we’d have been told. We’re on a need to know basis.

And so, with all of that we do know, and all of this that we don’t really need to know, what should we do?

*First and therefore most important, keep calm and get ready for Thanksgiving dinner*. Don’t forget the cranberry sauce.

*Second, be alert and watchful.* The TSA and other law enforcement agencies continually remind us to be alert for suspicious behaviors, objects that seem out of place, anything that seems wrong.

Jesus, too, tells us to “keep awake.”

Two Sundays from now we will celebrate the First Sunday of Advent. As we approach a new year in the church liturgical calendar, and as we enter the Advent season, preparing for the arrival of the Christ child, we are reminded to “keep awake.” Let’s watch the way we live. Let’s prepare our hearts for the day-to-day demands of living. Let’s you and I be in a state of joyful, confident readiness.

Amen.