

Need-to-Know Basis *Mark 13:1-8* | 11/18/2018

How much knowledge exists in the world today? Or is that a silly question? How can knowledge be quantified? Some people have tried. A study published in *Science Express* seven years ago attempted to calculate the world's total technological capacity, that is, the "information humankind is able to store, communicate and compute."

The conclusion of this study — which is now outdated — was that "humankind is able to store at least 295 exabytes of information. That's a number with 20 zeroes in it. Put another way, ... that's 315 times the number of grains of sand in the world. But it's still less than 1 percent of the information that is stored in all the DNA molecules of a human being."

No single human being is capable of knowing everything. We are fed too much information as it is. We see too much, we hear too much and we talk too much. Perhaps, then, if someone tells us that we're on a "need-to-know basis," we are not offended. We might be relieved. Knowledge brings responsibility. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss.

Where did the phrase "need-to-know basis" come from? 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 fulfil their duties.

But "need-to-know basis" exists in other contexts as well. For example, *wiseGEEK* 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."

Parents — to cite another example — do not 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 us 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 in today's text, clearly, the disciples think they do 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 uneducated fishermen from the uncultured 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!" No wonder, then, that as they were leaving the temple, some of the disciples remarked on the beauty of the temple, expressing amazement at the size of the stones used to construct it. "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" (v. 1).

Jesus was not impressed. Of course, he'd been to the temple before and, at the age of 12, asked questions of some of the most learned rabbis of the country. Jesus told the disciples that the temple was just a heap of rocks. "Ah, you've noticed! 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 asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (vv. 3-4).

Surprisingly, Jesus agreed with them — to a point. At the end of this chapter, Jesus reminded them that "about that day or hour [when the heavens and earth will pass away] no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (v. 32). 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 ... This is but the beginning of the birth pangs" (vv. 5-8).

So what do the disciples need to know? What do we need to know?

We need to know that false shepherds exist. False shepherds are always lurking — looking for sheep to fleece. What do they claim? That whereas most of us are on a need-to-know basis, they are not. They are part of God’s inner circle and therefore have access to knowledge no one else has. But, they claim, we too can know what they know. Be cautious, Jesus, says. 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 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 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. This is our hope.

We need to know that there is no cause for alarm, verse 7. Sometimes when everything is falling apart, coming down, things are really, for the first time, coming together. Father Michael K. Marsh 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.

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.

More people die while taking “selfies” than from shark attacks. Don’t need to know that.

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. *We don’t need to know what is going to happen tomorrow.* If we did, we’d have been told. We’re on a need-to-know basis.

What should we do? *First, and therefore most important, keep calm and get ready for Thanksgiving dinner.* Don’t forget 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. That is, we will unless Jesus comes back first. As we approach a new year in the church liturgical calendar, and as we enter the Advent season preparing for the celebration of the birth 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 be in a state of readiness.

Because we just don’t know when He’s coming!

Pastor Keith