

Mark 13:1-8
Pentecost XXIV November 19, 2006
"The End Isn't Near"

My mother had her 90th birthday last June. As a child, however, she remembers crying herself to sleep at night because she never thought she would live to be an adult. There was no particular peril that threatened her, no life-threatening disease. Her family went to a church that spoke literally and urgently about the end of the world. As a child, my mother did not hear that message as good news. What she heard from the adults whom she trusted was that the return of Christ was imminent, the world as we know it was about to end, and thus, she surmised, she would never have the opportunity to grow up.

Her Adventist Church was one of many denominations that formed out of the Millerite movement after the Great Disappointment of 1844. William Miller, after examining rather esoteric scriptural details, became convinced that the date of the second coming of Christ could be precisely calculated, and that that date was October 22, 1844. Speculation about the truth of this belief was on the front page of newspapers, and it is estimated that more than 100,000 were awaiting this great event, many of them having sold their homes, abandoned their farms and left their places of employment. Thereafter, October 22, 1844 became known as the Great Disappointment. Many left the Millerite movement, but many others went back to their Bibles and started recalculating. There was still a lot of recalculating going on when my mother was a little girl. And, of course, there is still a lot of recalculating going on today.

All of this "end of the world" talk has been the subject of satire and depicted in cartoons. It has been written off as fringe and delusional. But it was no laughing matter to my mother. It was frightening. And it is sobering when we hear how widespread such belief has become. 60 million copies of the Left Behind series of novels have been sold. Not everyone who reads them takes them seriously, but many do. A 2004 Newsweek poll found that 55% of Americans believe "that the faithful will be taken up to heaven in the Rapture." (Rapture being a word that appears nowhere in the Bible and is tied specifically to the vocabulary of recently invented end-of world scenarios.) If you believe that the world is about to end, then stewardship of the environment is suddenly unimportant. Fundamentalist religious leaders who claim to have influence with political leaders are advocating foreign policy decisions on the basis of what they hope will hasten the rush to Armageddon!

The end is not near! This kind of speculation and calculation regarding the second coming of Christ comes from poor scholarship that is highly selective about the parts of the Bible it takes literally, and fails to take the whole of the Bible seriously. The attempt to connect Bible prophecies with specific current events, theories about the rapture, discussion of premillennial dispensationalism, all of the hype surrounding the Left Behind series of novels - these are all relatively recent 19th and 20th century inventions of misguided biblical interpretation.

Yes, the Bible does speak about end times and the Church does teach that Christ will come again. On the first Sunday of every month our communion prayer repeats what is called the mystery of our faith: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." It is appropriately called a mystery, because the Bible does not systematically explain it or provide a timetable or provide a consistent order of events. This message is intended to empower us to live with hope in the present world, not to escape from it.

To say that Christ will come again is consistent with the overall Judeo-Christian view of history being linear. That is, we believe that there is an end to history, a purpose toward which we are moving, a fulfillment of God's promise of peace and justice. As Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice." But of that day or that hour no one knows, and neither can we describe the details of this fulfillment. We can only speak poetically and metaphorically as have those who long ago spoke of a crystal river running through a golden city and a tree of life with leaves for the healing of the nations.

I have shared in some of our adult classes the progression we find in the Bible from prophetic to apocalyptic. Written over a 2,000 year span, the Bible includes a variety of genres. There is poetry and there are letters. There is historical narrative and there are parables. There are prophetic books and there is apocalyptic literature.

By prophetic books I mean the Hebrew prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah and Isaiah. We have two main examples of Apocalyptic literature in the Bible: Daniel and Revelation. Also the 13th chapter of Mark (along with its parallels in Matthew and Luke) is often called the little apocalypse.

The prophets wrote between 800 B.C. and 500 B.C. Apocalyptic books flourished in both Judaism and Christianity from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D.

Prophetic and apocalyptic writings have contrasting styles. The prophet stands before the people or the king and pronounces, "Thus says the Lord, You have afflicted the poor, you have put other gods before me." Such a pronouncement is called an oracle. The prophet speaks directly for God.

The style of apocalyptic is symbolic imagery, often rather fantastic imagery. A beast with 10 horns rises out of the sea. The sun and the moon turn dark and stars fall from the sky. God communicates through a dreamlike vision with symbols and numbers that the audience will interpret as it refers back to scriptural passages and cultural connections that the persecuted community knows well.

The prophetic books were written during times of prosperity as well as the time of exile. The prophets speak words both of judgement and hope, but the predominant message of the prophets was a message of warning. Turn from your sinful ways. The prophets are best known for speaking truth to power. Speaking for God in times of prosperity, their words afflicted the comfortable.

The context of apocalyptic literature is **always** times of extreme persecution. The intended audience of the message is the faithful community threatened with hardship and extinction, and the content of the message is comfort for the afflicted. Hang on to your faith, endure in the face of persecution, God is with you and God will redeem you.

Apocalyptic literature is NOT about what is going to happen centuries later.

The definition of prophet is not someone who foretells the future, but rather, one who speaks for God. And apocalypse does not mean the end of the world. It is Greek for revelation. An apocalypse reveals God's truth. The imagery of the apocalypse reveals to the people how God is active in history, how God is active in their own history. The first readers of Daniel and Revelation saw their own times and their own lives being interpreted to them.

To take the Book of Revelation or the 13th chapter of Mark and make the verses into literal references to 20th or 21st century historical events is to rob the books of the power with which they spoke to their first century audience. The writers of these books

cared passionately about their contemporary brothers and sisters in persecuted communities and wrote to them a message that they would understand, the word of God for their time and place. Part of the reason many have a hard time understanding these writings is because we are not living in the time and the place of the intended audience. But when we read carefully, informed by the context, we find that the message of hope for the faithful is an eternal one for the people of every time and place.

It is a betrayal of intent to take treasured words and the powerful metaphorical images intended to give hope to the faithful and make them into something threatening and frightful aimed at the uninitiated. The Book of Revelation is not the text that the Church should use to do evangelism! If, on the other hand, you find yourself struggling to live faithfully in a dark world, turn to the images of Revelation and find hope in the message that Spirit is stronger than Empire.

The apocalyptic message is a word of comfort rather than fear. Listen to how Jesus comforts his disciples at the beginning of his apocalyptic discourse in Mark 13:

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” It sounds like Little Red Riding Hood at grandmother’s house, doesn’t it? The fishermen from Galilee are intimidated by the grandeur of Jerusalem. Jesus knows that they will soon be intimidated by greater threats. He speaks of it just a few verses later when he says “beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten ... and you will stand before governors and kings” When Mark recorded these words in his Gospel, his first readers could identify completely with them. “This is exactly what is happening to us.”

But Jesus wants his followers to know that governors and kings and empires have no power over them.

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” And if the walls could speak they might reply on behalf of empire everywhere: “All the better to crush you with, my insignificant peasants.” But the reply of Jesus emphasizes that power does not reside with those who built the Temple, or with Caesar who built Rome, or with Pharaoh who built the pyramids. And so when you come under the thumb of such power, when you are brought before tribunals and threatened for your faith, know that a greater power is available to you.

“When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 13:11)

In the first century and in every century since there have been those who predicted the imminent and literal return of Christ. Christianity has survived despite the disappointment of these predictions. That is because there have been many more who have known the truth that the kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem is always breaking into history at the present moment and anticipated more fully in the next moment, and therefore empowering God’s people to live with faith, hope and love in difficult times.

I am reminded again of the story I heard Joe Walker tell many years ago. He recalled serving as a student pastor of a little church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the little elderly woman there known simply as “Jonesy.” This was a church that had two rooms, the only two rooms necessary for a Methodist church, one to worship in and one to eat in. Jonesy was there whenever the church’s doors were open. A faithful woman with strong roots from her upbringing in rural Arkansas, her great disappointment was that her church

did not have a hot water heater. There was just no money to replace the one that had failed years before.

One morning young pastor Joe arrived at the church, patting the bricks to be sure that everything was in place. Going into the kitchen he saw a freshly installed hot water heater. Without hesitation he walked the couple of blocks to Jonesy's little home. She met him on her front porch and tried to engage him in conversation. But Joe managed to make an excuse to find his way into her kitchen, where he saw a vacant spot where her hot water heater used to be. "Jonesy," he said, "you didn't have to do that."

"If I had had to do that, I wouldn't have!" replied Jonesy.

She then took her young pastor back into the living room to tell him a story. "Back in Arkansas," she explained, "people pass on truth to each other by telling stories that aren't true. This is one story my mother told me. When I was just old enough to understand she took me on her lap and told me, 'the night you were born I looked out that window up into the sky and saw a star, a brand new star that had never been there before. And then I heard all the angels in the heavens come together to sing a song that had never been heard before.'" Then Jonesy looked at her young student pastor and said, "Joe, I have my own star and my own angel's song, what do I need a hot water heater for?!"

Jonesy knew and experienced the Spirit of God that sustains life through difficult times! Astronomers cannot document the birth of a star on the day that Jonesy was born. Perhaps no one but her mother heard that angel's song. But Jonesy knew that the story was true – that God had always and would always sustain her through the roughest of times. That is the power that undergirded her life, and our lives as well.

O Lord help us.