

Routine History

Mark 13:1-8

Sunday, November 14, 2021 – Aledo UMC

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Gospel Lesson, Mark 13:1-8

¹ As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!"

² "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

⁵ Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

Sermon, "Routine History"

How many of you remember the "2012 Phenomenon"? It was an apocalyptic notion that was rooted in the Mayan Long Count Calendar. By our reckoning, the Mayans identified August 11, 3114 BC as the date for the creation of the world. Their calendar then continued for 5,126 years, ending on December 12, 2012, again, according to our reckoning. The Mayan Long Count Calendar prompted speculation that the world would end on 12/12/12.

Hollywood decided to cash in on what it may have hoped would be an apocalyptic frenzy by releasing the apocalyptic movie, "2012" in 2009 in which a couple, played by John Cusak and Amanda Peet, have their family vacation interrupted by the end of the world. Volcanoes erupt. Skyscrapers collapse. Mountains crumble to the ground. Fires rage and the oceans spew forth their tsunamis. California tumbles into the sea, which means that Donald Fagan and Walter Becker had to go back to their old school in Annandale.

Call it superstition. Call it a fascination with end-time events, but there was a season prior to 12/12/12 when some people believed the Mayans were more credible than the Word of God. Of course, that season passed. The world did not end. And then, just seven years later, the worldwide coronavirus pandemic gave us another reason to speculate that the end of the world was at hand. But that was in 2020. In 2021, we have a choice of three vaccines, and we are finally seeing some light at the end of the tunnel.

Our fascination with the end of the world is not a new thing. One of the more fascinating web sites on the Internet presents "A Brief History of the Apocalypse"¹ which lists over 400

¹ www.abhota.info

predictions for the end of the world—all of which have come and gone while this old green globe remains.

The earliest prediction dates back to an Assyrian clay tablet from about 2800 B.C. and which bears the words, “Our earth is degenerate in these latter days. There are signs that the world is speedily coming to an end. Bribery and corruption are common.”

A fascination with the end times is embedded in the words of scripture; it is embedded Mark chapter 13. In fact, many of Jesus’ disciples believed that the end of the world would come during their lifetime.

It’s embedded in many of the end-of-the-world assumptions which are so foundational to the belief system of a large segment of contemporary Christianity. Those assumptions propelled Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins to the top of the best seller lists with their 16-volume *Left Behind* series.

But are those assumptions correct? Are those assumptions true to the words of Jesus? Let’s take a closer look.

First of all, the discussion opens as the disciples bragged about the temple to Jesus. That in and of itself is quite fascinating because that bragging comes immediately after a poor widow puts her two small coins in the temple collection box.

The context indicates that the disciples as well as the Pharisees are more concerned about the temple than they are with true faith and devotion to God. There’s nothing wrong with attending to the temple; however, if we become so focused on the temple that we take our eyes off Jesus, then we’ve turned the temple into an idol.

Even the disciples seemed to be falling prey to temple idolatry. So Jesus turns the discussion upside down by telling them that the day was coming when their temple would be utterly destroyed. “You’re impressed by this grandiose architecture?” he declares. “There’s not a stone in the whole works that is not going to end up in a heap of rubble” (*The Message*).

Those were troubling words to the disciples. Even though they were fishermen as opposed to priests or Pharisees, they still found a certain amount of security in the temple. If it were to be destroyed, what would come of their faith? According to their belief system, the temple was the only place where atonement for sin could be made. If the temple were destroyed, would that also mean the end of atonement for sin?

So the disciples asked Jesus for a sign: “Tell us, when is this going to happen? What sign will we get that things are coming to a head?” (*The Message*).

I believe this is where many well-intentioned Christians get off-track. They see the following verses as a kind of crystal ball, with Jesus gazing into it with a far-away, detached look in his eyes.

But Jesus is not turning over Tarot cards to be interpreted. He is, rather, at once both plainspoken and ambiguous. Instead of predicting the future, Jesus is giving us words of caution to be followed.

His first cautionary word concerns people who present themselves as Christians who have the mind of God. They will try to deceive many, even as they have deceived themselves. Steer

clear of them lest you become deceived as well. However, the advent of such false prophets is not the end of the world. Look at the words of Jesus—and I love the way *The Message* phrases it: “This is routine history and (not a) sign of the end” (*The Message*). Maybe what Jesus means is the end of the world will not come at a time determined by wackos with a television show on some religious network.

Speaking of which, just seven weeks ago Television Evangelist Jesse Duplantis proclaimed that Jesus hadn’t come back to earth yet because Christians haven’t been giving enough money to the work of God—in particular, they’re not giving enough money to Jesse Duplantis. Incidentally, Jesse Duplantis brags that he is a multi-millionaire with his own private airplane.

I’ve got news for you, Jesse Duplantis: Jesus is not going to come back just because you’re running a Victory-thon fundraiser. And if I were as unabashedly greedy as you, I wouldn’t want Jesus to come back because I would be scared to death of what he would say about my greed and my empire.

Friends, the end of the world will come when God is good and ready for it to come.

Jesus’ second cautionary word concerns the chaos created by humankind, especially as nations go to war against other nations. However, such wars do not necessarily signal the end of the world. There have been wars since the Battle of Siddim in Genesis 14—that’s the first war recorded in the Bible. As a nation, we thought we would have world peace after the collapse of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991. Just ten years later, that peace was shattered on September 11, 2001

Jesus seems to be saying, “Don’t read too much into wars or nations rising up against nations. ‘This is routine history and (not a) sign of the end’” (*The Message*). Maybe what Jesus means is that the end of the world will not come by human intervention, no matter how violent it may be. The end of the world is in the hands of God and God alone.

Jesus’ third cautionary word concerns the chaos found in nature: earthquakes and famines. We might add hurricanes and tsunamis and yes, I think we can add pandemics. Once again, they’ve all been around as long as the earth has spun on its axis. And there’s nothing new about our current pandemic. In 1918, churches and schools were closed because of the Spanish flu epidemic. Parishioners were encouraged to “pray at home”—without the help of Facebook Live!

Notice that Jesus tells us that such natural disasters do not signal the end of the world. Jesus seems to be saying, “Don’t read too much into earthquakes and famines. ‘This is routine history and (not a) sign of the end’” (*The Message*).

In other words, the end is not going to come according to the capriciousness of nature; rather, the end is going to come according to the will of God the Father.

In each case—false prophets, wars or cataclysmic events—Jesus seems to be saying, “These things are not the end of the world.”

Keep in mind that these words of Jesus were spoken to a specific people at a specific point in time. Jesus is speaking to the events of his generation. That generation lived under the tyranny of Rome. They saw wars. They heard rumors of wars. They witnessed the destruction

of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. They lived under persecution. They dealt with false teachers and prophets. That generation needed to know how to remain faithful to God in the midst of such perils. To that generation, these words of Jesus were not meant to convey prophecies as much as they were meant to convey patience and trust and especially hope. They needed to know that God was not abandoning them even though they faced all those cataclysmic events.

Likewise, when we find ourselves in the midst of wars or earthquakes or false prophets, this passage is not telling us to stockpile pork and beans in our basements; this passage is calling us to intentionally place our trust in God. When it looks like it's the end of the world, this passage is calling us to lean on Jesus like we've never leaned on him before.

The destruction of the World Trade Center, the Iowa derecho, the coronavirus pandemic, or Jesse Duplantis are not signs of the end; they're just routine history. But for those who've had to live through those tragedies, there's nothing routine about them. For those who are closest to those situations—it may feel like the end of the world. And to those persons, Jesus says, And above all, stay true to God.

What about you? Maybe you've had a tough year. The pandemic, the economy—even the weather can gang up on us and make us feel as though it's the end of the world.

Take heart, my friend, from the words of Jesus: "This is routine history and (not a) sign of the end." So put your faith in him. Only God can prepare us for the end of the world. And we prepare ourselves for the end of the world the same way we prepare ourselves for heaven. In fact, we prepare ourselves for the end of the world the same way we prepare ourselves for each and every day: by putting our complete trust in God. And when we put our trust in God even in the midst of chaos, we will find that we have discovered true, genuine hope. Not only that, but we will also find that God grants to us his "peace which surpasses all understanding" and is "able to keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."²

² Philippians 4:7.