

## **“Is the End of the World at Hand?”**

Date: Oct. 26, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Revelation 21:1-4; Zechariah 9:9-12

Occasion: Unafraid, series

Themes: Fear, Apocalypse, End Times

One of the big words I learned in seminary was the word “apocalypse.” It refers to a time in history when God will destroy the ruling powers of evil and restore the righteous in a cosmic, cataclysmic destruction. Most people call it “the end times,” or, “the end of the world.”

Some people, maybe many people – I don’t know, believe we are living in the end times. They fear the future; they are not hopeful; they are full of doom and gloom. Movies like “Planet of the Apes,” “Mad Max” and “The Hunger Games” offer bleak views of the future.

The reason these apocalyptic visions are the stuff of best-selling novels and movies is because they tap into our deep-seated fears about the future. Most of us are just a bit afraid that the world really is coming to a terrifying end. Our scientists, politicians and preachers at times feed this fear of grim times ahead.

What are we afraid of? Environmental disasters as a result of climate change; pandemics that aren’t under control; civil strife; nuclear explosions; terrorism; and even widespread anarchy. The anxiety about the upcoming election and what *might* happen afterwards has many people frightened.

Thank goodness there are reasonable, intelligent people who evaluate and seek to protect us from likely possible threats. This can be one of the “good gifts” of fear that we spoke of earlier. If we can anticipate the worst case scenario, then we can prepare and react accordingly to protect ourselves and others from them.

At the same time, our fears about the future can lead us into a quagmire of over-reaction. Our fears can be preyed upon by charlatans hoping to make a buck, by foreign countries seeking to meddle in our affairs; by politicians hoping to get elected; by causes hoping to raise funds; and by preachers hoping to literally scare the hell out of people.

Do you remember Y2K? At the end of 1999, as we ended one millennium and entered a new one, there were catastrophic fears about what would happen. Many feared that our computer systems couldn't handle the change. Airplanes would fall out of the sky; banks and ATMs would not function; the electric grid would shut down. One well-known preacher encouraged his flock to buy guns in the event of a revolution.

What happened when the clock turned over to January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000? Nearly nothing. The governments of countries which spent little, if anything, to address the issue continued without a hitch. Planes did not fall from the sky. Jesus did not return in the following months. However, there were millions of people who had cases of drinking water and food, and new gas generators taking up space in their garages.

Of course, it is extremely naïve to think we can skip through life thinking only happy thoughts. Some challenges we face today are truly daunting on a global scale. But the cries of "the end of the world as we know it," can breed fear and hysteria in some people.

The greatest fear and threat to the human race for many people today is global warming, with its prediction of melted polar ice caps, flooded coastlines, major temperature shifts across the globe and increasing severe weather patterns. For others, the biggest fear is the loss of freedom, and a government that seems to control nearly every aspect of life.

Folks on both sides of the political divide fear the world will end if the other guy is elected. Listen to what both candidates say about the other. Many say this is the most important election of our lifetime, deciding the future of our democracy. Will the world end if the other side wins? Probably not, even if we don't like the decisions being made by the party in power.

As we have learned in the course of this sermon series, fear can be a good thing if it leads us to address real threats in helpful ways. But it can also be devastating when it is exaggerated, uninformed, or used by others to manipulate us.

In nearly every age, human beings have lived in dread of enemies, apocalyptic visions and potential catastrophes that might come upon us, either from the gods, from the devil, from nature or from our enemies. Some of these fears had a foundation in facts and represented very real possibilities.

But despite 2,000 years of possible Armageddon, the human race is still here. Sometimes our fears saved us as we got to work to solve great problems. Sometimes our fears were overblown and nearly destroyed us. Living unafraid does not require us to purchase an underground bomb shelter where we can wait out the destruction up above.

It simply comes down to our acronym, which we have used in several previous talks. **F** – Face your fears with faith. **E**- Examine your assumptions in light of the facts. **A** – Attack your anxieties with action. **R**- Release your cares to God.

*Facing our fears with faith* means starting with a bias of hope. This is not only faith in God, but it also our faith in modern science's ability to find solution or alternatives, or faith in our fellow human beings or our institutions.

*We examine our assumptions* that are frightening to us in light of the facts. So often, those of us on both on the right and the left, will hear of a possible threat that aligns with our bias, and we immediately accept it as fact, rather than digging deeper by looking into subject-matter experts, people who actually know what they're talking about. In the case of the Y2K scare, the experts were right, while the fear-mongers got it all wrong.

*Attacking our anxieties with action* means doing what we can do to address our fears or to be part of the solution, not the problem. Are you fearful about global warming; then take action to do your part to reduce your carbon footprint. Are you anxious about the election; then do your part and campaign for your candidate and be sure to vote.

*Ultimately, we have to release our fears to God.* Once I have committed to living with an attitude of hope, and once I have looked carefully at the facts, considering multiple sides to an issue, and once I have done all that I can do, I have to put my trust in God.

To constantly replay the worst-case scenarios over and over again in my mind is not a healthy way to live. You and I can make ourselves anxious to death with that line of thinking. At some point, we have to release our fears to God, trusting in God's goodness, love and mercy.

We are not the first generation to face a pandemic. We are not the first generation to fear the election of a leader we didn't like. We are not the first generation to face the threat of nuclear disaster. We are not the first generation to have fears about the future. And God has been with every one of those previous generations. God is with us as well. Amen?

Adam Hamilton guides us to the book of Revelation as a source of comfort during these anxious times. He recalls the very real threat of war between the Soviets and the United States in 1982-1983. In his book,

*Unafraid*, he says, “Fear was an appropriate response for anyone who understood the gravity of the situation. I wanted to live, despite this fear, unafraid. And I remember finding comfort in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible.”

He says, “Mine was not the comfort drawn from those who see Revelation as a road map to the End Times. In fact, most scholars don’t view Revelation in this way, but instead as a letter written to the Christians of that time, encouraging them to remain steadfast, to not compromise with the culture around them, and to know that even if they were persecuted or put to death, *God* would ultimately prevail.”

Hear again the words of our first lesson today. (Rev. 21:1-4) Revelation *ends* by taking readers back to the Garden of Eden, where the Bible *begins*. It paints a picture of the climax of human history. In the end, Eden is restored.

Listen, God didn’t promise his people then or now that everything would always be easy. But God did promise to be with them and that ultimately *God* would triumph. Though paradise was lost in the opening chapters of the Bible, the Bible ends with paradise restored.

In the end, God, goodness, love, and life will ultimately prevail, even if for a time, evil, destruction and death appear to have the upper hand. Zechariah called God’s people in chapter 9:12 “prisoners of hope.”

So my friends, no matter how frightening the future may seem, God is still God, you *are* God’s people, and there is *ALWAYS* hope. The Scriptures don’t lead us to ignore the dangers and threats in our world today. But they do show us how to respond to these fears with courage and hope. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Convergent Books, 2018. pp. 133-142.