

To What End?

Mark 13:1-8, Hebrews 10:11-25

Whitefish UMC

November 15, 2009

- † As if on cue, today's scripture passage about the end times coincides with the release of the latest apocalyptic thriller, "2012" in our local multiplex. "2012" capitalizes on the idea of a global doomsday event coinciding with the end of the Mayan Long Count Calendar—December 21, 2012.
- † The story follows an academic researcher leading a group of people in a fight to counteract the cataclysmic events predicted by the ancient Mayan calendar and other historical documents, astronomy, biblical, and scientific data.
- † There's plenty of action, mysterious and ancient messages, destruction, earthquakes, tsunamis, narrow escapes, explosions, and more! The characters even out-run, out-drive, and out-fly the massive collapse of the entire West Coast. Yipes! Oh my!
- † "2012" joins a long line of end of times movies: "Independence Day," "The Day After Tomorrow," "The Fifth Element," "End of Days," "Left Behind: The Movie," and the older but updated "War of the Worlds," and "The Day the Earth Stood Still." And that's just a partial list!
- † What is it with our fascination with the end of days and books and movies that portray these scary times? Talking about the end of the world is nothing new. We fear it, hope it doesn't happen, can't wait for it to happen, pray that we will survive it somehow, want to know

the signs of it approaching, and are sometimes shocked or depressed by the thought of it.

- † Yet we want the details. And we probably want to be sure we will be able to out-run any explosions, tidal waves, or earthquakes that might accompany these predictions—just like in the movies!
- † The end of the world, and what follows, was a hot topic in Jesus' time, too. A lot of people thought it was going to happen any day, and that was 2,000 years ago. They wanted to know if what they were experiencing in life—war, persecution, famines, earthquakes, sickness, political turmoil—were signs that the end of the world was near.
- † Sound familiar? Of course it does. Throughout history, during times of particular struggle and suffering and oppression, people have looked in the fear and frustration with the present for a reason for it all. And people of faith look beyond the troubles of the present for divine intervention in a big way.
- † For the people of Israel, it seemed that God's judgment day could come none too soon. The Old Testament Book of Daniel expresses their hopes and fears. And it was into this setting that Jesus of Nazareth was born and grew up. The people were increasingly downtrodden and marginalized by Rome and even their own leaders.
- † And so they looked to God to crush their enemies in some great, world-altering event. But it didn't happen that way at all—not then or anytime since. The sad thing is that, in the name of God, false prophets and messiahs often claim to be the voice or face of a god who will wreak havoc on all but the truest believers.

- † At least four times in the Gospel for this week Jesus warns his followers: “Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming ‘I am he,’ and deceive many....You must be on your guard. These false prophets and false Christs would, if possible, deceive even his most intimate associates, said Jesus.
- † One writer, Daniel Clendenin, calls this “religion gone bad.” Jesus saw plenty of it among even his disciples. They jockeyed for greatness and glory and even wanted to exterminate a Samaritan village, among other sins in the name of their Messiah.
- † We’ve known too much of violence and exploitation in the name of God’s love over the centuries. In the name of God’s love Christians have slaughtered Muslims in the Crusades, Jews in the Holocaust, Native Americans, and each other.
- † And of course this evil disguised as religion is not limited to Christianity. We’ve heard enough about insanity and death in the name of Allah to last a lifetime, as the memorial services for the dead at Fort Hood echo in our memories.
- † Why do people do evil in the name of religion and why do we talk about love but torture and annihilate instead? Some argue that violence is more a function of biology than religion. David Livingstone Smith argues that war is deeply imbedded in human nature. As such war is not a pathology or aberrant choice but a “normal feature of human life.”
- † Does that mean that we should excuse violence in the name of religion? Of course not. As the scripture says, we must be on guard against it. Daniel Clendenin names ten warning bells:
 1. Fanatical claims of absolute truth—doubt-free and uncritical.

2. Identifying the Gospel with nationalistic ideologies, partisan politics, state power, and ethnic identity.
3. Blind obedience to totalitarian, charismatic, or authoritarian leaders, personality cults, of views that undermine moral integrity, personal freedom, individual responsibility, and intellectual inquiry.
4. Ushering in the end times in the name of your religion. See the chilling movie “Jesus Camp” for an example.
5. Justifying religious ends by dubious means.
6. Any and all forms of dehumanization, from openly declaring war on your enemy, demonizing those who differ from you, construing your neighbor as an Other, to claiming God is on your side alone.
7. Pressure tactics of coercion, deception, and false advertisement.
8. Alienation, isolation, and withdrawal from family, friends, and society, whether psychologically or literally. (Think of David Koresh or Jim Jones.)
9. Exploitation and all forms of unreasonable demands upon a person’s time, money, resources, family, friendships, sexuality, etc.
10. Oddball, sectarian interpretations of scripture that have little or no support from the broad, classical tradition of a particular religion.

† In our time, there are plenty of examples of these aberrations throughout culture. It’s a tough balancing act to call “religion gone bad” to account without falling prey to the same intolerance and absolute certainty.

- † So what are we to do? To what end are these warnings of Jesus in today's scripture to be taken? When we hear talk of the end times, see it in bloody technicolor on the screen, should we act like nothing is going to happen? Or should we forget about the present and become obsessed with the end? Or should we just bury our head under the covers?
- † Jesus has another idea: actively wait. Don't ignore the life we have right now—it's a gift entrusted to us. Don't run away and ignore everything. Instead, challenge each other to actions and relationships of love, compassion, and justice.
- † Get together and encourage each other. Never let go of hope. We have been given life and set free by God's love and forgiveness so we can live life fully! As the writer of Hebrews says: *Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*
- † As the leaves fall from the trees and the earth goes brown and bare, the church contemplates the end as well—the end of our lives in death and the end of the world in Christ's coming. In the church calendar and in the lectionary, there is an increasing sense of urgency, and the scriptures reflect it.
- † In my last year of seminary, I was chosen to preach this apocalyptic text from Mark before the whole community. Why couldn't I have gotten an easy one, like "Let the little children come to me" instead? I was dismayed to say the least.

- † But I was forced to think about the end times, and it did me good. For the very idea that there will be an end is threatening to those of us who have pretty good lives and good plans for the future.
- † But for those of us who experience life as a roller coaster of ups and downs, on the other hand, or those who experience life as mostly downs, the idea of an “end to it all” may be comforting.
- † Those among us who are very elderly or very ill think often about the end of our lives. We prepare and put things in order. Those of us who aren’t ill or elderly are busy living in the middle of things. But what if we all needed to prepare for the end?
- † What if you knew you only had one month left in your life? Where would you focus your time? Would you resolve issues at work? Would you travel to a place you always wanted to go? Would you pray more, go to church more, do that generous act you always wanted to do for others?
- † Would you find ways to leave your mark on the world? Would you reconcile a broken relationship? If you answered yes to any of these questions, as I have, we indicate that in our last days we’d be better stewards of all the things God has given us in this life—better, at least, than we are now.
- † In the intensity of last days, we’d live better, be better. We’d be more generous, focused on the important things in life. Of course the question is, why do we need to be under the threat of the END to be better stewards of our lives?
- † Here’s another what if—What if we discovered that our congregation only had one more month to exist? If I discovered that probability, I’d

want all of us to be together as much as possible, to use our resources so that we could make a real difference for the future.

- † Of course, you say, there is an impracticality to all of this. If things aren't going to end, it's irresponsible to live as if it were true.
- † But Jesus calls us to both live with the intensity of last days while living our regular lives. He reminds us that we are not ultimately invested in this world, and he liberates us to work with courage, with hope. End times call for lots of hope and really quick reordering of priorities. End times call for alertness, paying attention, sharpness.
- † Can you feel the tingle of expectation for the days ahead? Uncertainty and fear might creep in, but not when we have each other for encouragement and faith.
- † Remember, Jesus said you will hear of wars and earthquakes and famines, but it doesn't mean the end is near. You will hear of the comings and goings of institutions and traditions, but it doesn't mean the end is near.
- † It may only be, Jesus says, the beginning of what God has planned. The kingdom of God is already and not yet, birthing in our inner divine impulses and when we strive for compassion, mercy, and justice. In Jesus name, hear this prayer for these days:
- † God, make me brave for life: oh braver than this.
Let me straighten after pain, as a tree straightens after the rain,
Shining and lovely again.
God make me brave for life; much braver than this.
As the blown grass lifts, let me rise
From sorrow with quiet eyes,
Knowing your way is wise.

God make me brave, life brings
such blinding things.
Help me to keep my sight;
Help me to see clearly
that in darkness, you are light.
Amen.

Sources:

Daniel Clendenin, “You Must be On Your Guard”

<http://journeywithjesus.net>

Mary W. Anderson, “Time’s Up,” <http://religion-online.org>

Rod G. Boriak, “Faith Lens” <http://blogs.elca.org>