

## Sermon, November 29, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends from Morgantown, Jenny and Nathan Wilson, who are providing Special Music. Please check out their Facebook and Google websites. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume public worship. New pandemic cases, hospitalizations and deaths are at record highs. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshiping together, but safely apart. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is [stmarksoakland.com](http://stmarksoakland.com). You can also donate through our Facebook page. Now today's stupid joke.

Mark Twain said when the end times of the Apocalypse arrive, he wants to be in Cincinnati. Why Cincinnati? Because according to him, by the time something new comes to Cincinnati, it has already been everywhere else for at least ten years. Hold that thought.

*Music*

**The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.**

**A reading from Isaiah, the sixty-fourth chapter.**

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. Here ends the reading.

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**The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the thirteenth chapter.**

Jesus said, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.

Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

The Gospel of the Lord

**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

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Let me be the first to wish you Happy New Year. You see, today is the first Sunday of Advent which begins the new year in the church calendar. Now you might THINK we'd start the year looking forward in joy with great anticipation of Christmas Eve and Christmas Morning. And while we're at it, maybe also the end of the year 2020, the coming spring, Easter, summer and the rest of the undoubtedly great year ahead.

But you'd be wrong. Because every year instead our gospel readings begin the year looking forward, with fear and trembling, to the destruction of the earth and the end of time.

Today's reading is part of the so-called "Little Apocalypse" otherwise known as Mark chapter thirteen. Other years we read Matthew's or Luke's version of the same speech. Meanwhile on clergy blogs and Facebook groups pastors and preachers all week long have been making end-of-the-world jokes...like there's no tomorrow. Yeah—like that one.

I have heard people worry that, in the middle of a worldwide pandemic, maybe we SHOULD be thinking that the end times are indeed imminent. We certainly wouldn't be the first folks ever to think that way.

In the Bible, everyone from Daniel and Paul to John the Baptist and Jesus warned the end times were rapidly approaching. You know—coming like any day now. Yet here we are two thousand years or more later and still they haven't. C.S. Lewis called verse thirty of today's Gospel reading the most embarrassing verse of the Bible. That's the one where Jesus says, "This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." Well, not only did THAT generation pass away, so have more than fifty subsequent generations since.

Lewis said we have no choice but to conclude that either Jesus was flat-out lying, or at least Mark's author was. Well, maybe. Meanwhile countless someones from somewhere continue to this day to stir up fear and anxiety by announcing yet more certain signs of impending doom. Maybe it's a new comet, a meteor or solar eclipse; or perhaps, God forbid, yet another war.

COVID 19 certainly is frightening, but it certainly hasn't been the only disease leading to fears about the end. There have been many scary superbugs and viruses in human history, and even in my life time. AIDS, Ebola, Zika, the Spanish Flu and bubonic plague come to mind. Who can forget the panic surrounding Y2K and the end of the Mayan Calendar?

I've probably told you this before, but my first day of seminary classes was September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. That's right—9/11.

More than a few of my friends and family members considered it a sure sign of the end times. Not so much the planes and terrorists, mind you...but that Scott was actually going to seminary.

These days it's mostly Fundamentalist authors and TV preachers who delight in scaring the beeebies out of folks with end times talk and doomsday clocks. Fear sells books, after all, and movie tickets too. Meanwhile most Mainline Protestants like us HARDLY EVER talk about the end times. Let's fix that.

According to Isaac Azimov's Book of Facts, archaeologists a while back stumbled upon an ancient Assyrian clay tablet that is among the oldest human writings known. Called the Liber Censualis, they estimated it dates to around 2800 BCE—nearly five thousand years ago! And believe it or not, that tablet warns of the imminent destruction of the earth and the end of time. So apparently apocalypses have indeed been around forever, but they were probably never more popular as a Near East literary genre than the late centuries BCE through the early centuries CE. Hundreds of them were written. A few even made the Bible.

The word Apocalypse roughly means "Revelation." Although more correctly it means, "Removing the veil or cover from something to expose what is hidden inside." And if you do that with the Bible's apocalypses, you might be surprised what you'll find in there. The major Apocalypses of the Bible are the last half of the Book of Daniel, The Book of Revelation, and Mark 13. Sure, there are also a few end-times-verses scattered here and there in other books. Spanning a period of three centuries, Daniel, Mark and Revelation were written in times of widespread fear, persecution, violence and political upheaval.

For Daniel it was the Seleucid reign of terror leading up to the Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE. In the midst of oppression, persecution and desperation, Daniel's apocalypse promised

God's people reprieve and vindication, and guess what? He was right! A successful uprising led to a hundred years of peace and independence, conditions that have been very rare in the long history of Israel.

For Mark it was the failed Jewish revolt and violent Roman suppression of same that led to the destruction of Jerusalem, its Temple and the slaughter of thousands of its citizens around the year seventy. By the time Mark put Jesus' words to paper, the Temple was gone, the city lay in ruins and many Christians and Jews were scattered or dead.

Scholars say Revelation was likely penned some thirty years after that by John the Seer after the end of the reign of Domitian. Again it was a time of widespread fear and wholesale persecution of both Christians and Jews alike, especially in Asia Minor, home of the seven churches to whom the book is specifically addressed.

Some think that Apocalyptic fervor helped to fuel the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome of the mid 130s. But as usual, no heavenly figure appeared in the clouds as promised to lead the upstart Jewish insurgents to victory. They were summarily slaughtered in what has been called the Great Genocide of Judea. Needless to say after that, apocalyptic literature fell out of favor, at least for a while.

Meanwhile, scholars suggest all three biblical apocalypses were not so much foretelling the future, which is the way many folks tend to read them these days. They instead creatively portrayed recent horrific events of the past, already known and experienced by their first readers, describing and explaining them symbolically from a cosmic perspective. Their primary purpose was to address present fears and suffering and provide comfort and assurance for troubled folks in their own times.

If Revelation, Daniel, Mark's Little Apocalypse and for that matter the ancient Mayan calendar really were primarily concerned with OUR time or OUR future, then they would have been completely irrelevant to the very folks for whom they were written in the first place.

Read them again with that in mind and you'll likely see them differently. These are NOT scary books. They are sensitive and pastoral. They affirm that despite the tragedies and horrors that have always been a part of human existence, this world is NOT all there is. God is with us, and will get us through whatever horrors and traumas we will face. So why have we gotten these writings so wrong?

In his Book "Speaking Christian," The late theologian and New Testament Scholar Marcus Borg wrote that MANY of the fundamental principles of Christianity have been distorted over the centuries. Some even hijacked. Borg thought the apocalypse and second coming have become way too prominent in contemporary Christianity. He says things were different for first century Christians, for whom the image of the imminent return of Jesus was much more critical.

Devotion to Jesus' second coming expressed the belief that he was not just the Christ of the past but also the present and future. His passion BEGAN the coming Kingdom of God, and people of faith should still believe he WILL complete that work. But In his own time. In his own way. And that is a belief that should bring comfort, not fear.

So what about that "This generation will not pass away" thing that bothered C.S. Lewis so much? Funny, but THAT could just be a matter of translation. In the original Greek, the words translated as "THIS GENERATION" don't necessarily mean that. The words are:  $\eta\ \gamma\epsilon\ \nu\alpha\ \lambda\ \alpha\ \upsilon\ \alpha\ \theta\ \eta$  . Which COULD mean "this generation." But could also mean, "This particular group or sect of people."

In other words, Jesus may have instead promised that rag-tag faith-hope-and love group of sinners and outcasts who call themselves Christians, begun by Jesus would continue in Jesus. And sure enough...for thousands of years now...it has.

To understand apocalyptic writing today is to understand that sometimes people **STILL** become so desperate that their only hope seems to be that the world they are experiencing **WILL** just go away. Apocalypse is, in essence, the poetry of pain and despair, but coupled with the fantasy of escape and resolution, which challenge us neither to fear nor to silence, but instead to words...and to actions.

Because the greatest danger to our faith does not come so much from an imminent end, but from nodding off into complacency. Jesus' call to us is to wake up to the suffering that continues unchecked in our world. And to do something about it.

Watchful living means carrying out our faith in ways that make the date of the end completely irrelevant. It calls us to a readiness for living, not dying.

It teaches us **NOT** to spend each day as if it were our last, but to live thoughtfully and conscientiously, knowing that what we do today **WILL** affect all the world's tomorrows.

It is a call to watchfulness meant to lead us to a greater awareness of the world around us. Where we suddenly notice things like new leaves sprouting on fig trees; the earth, in its shaking, and...the cries of our brothers and sisters still suffering. It demands we respond, not ignore. To be bold, not afraid. In the spirit of Christian love.

My favorite end-of-the-world bumper sticker explains it this way: "Jesus IS coming. Look Busy..." Amen.