

Sermon
Mark 13:24-37
1 Advent B; Sunday, November 29, 2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

I took a break from working on a sermon several weeks ago to answer a knock at the door. Sure enough, since it was Saturday, it was the Jehovah's Witnesses standing in front of me. They said they were canvassing the neighborhood and asked if they could share a few verses of Scripture with me. "Sure," I said.

So Blanca turned to the 3rd chapter of 2nd Timothy and read several lines from Paul's letter which suggest what will happen in the end of times. She read that we will become "boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to our parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhumane, slanderers, brutes, swollen with conceit, haters of good, and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

Then she asked, "Can't you see that happening now? The world is getting worse, isn't it? ***Isn't it?***"

Trying really hard not to be confrontational, (and for those of you who know me well, you know what a struggle *that* is!) but refusing to play along, I ***always*** ask,

"So, out of the whole of the Bible, why did you choose those verses to read to me today? Why didn't you talk to me about God's love for me, for this community, for this world? Where might I see God's grace? What about finding hope? Wouldn't those be more appropriate verses to share?" She didn't have an answer.

Now, If I were an unchurched person, or someone who had become disenchanted and had left the church, I don't think calling me an arrogant, abusive brute would encourage me to explore the faith these women hoped to share. Instead, I think people yearn for a God that loves and accepts them, a God who is there for them and provides for them. Maybe it's just me, but I think that would have been a better approach.

This is how the end of the world is usually characterized: fire and brimstone, judgment and damnation, a violent and angry God. That is how our Gospel reading is often read and understood. Jesus says that in days of suffering, at a time that only God knows, the sun, moon and stars will go dark, and Jesus will return in power and glory. Three times he urges his listeners to "Keep alert! Keep awake!"

This reading is part of what is known as "the little apocalypse" in the Gospel of Mark. These sayings come in the context of Jesus foretelling the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – an event that would have happened around the time of the writing of the Gospel of Mark in the year 70.

The Temple was the epicenter of religious devotion in Judaism for over 1000 years before Jesus. 1000 years, that's four times as long as our country has existed. 1000 years. 40 generations. It was simply a given for the early Christians. And even though Jesus cleansed the Temple, he didn't want to destroy it. But the Romans did destroy it, they razed it to the ground, and all that remains today is the remnant of one wall.

For the people in Mark's community, for the early Christians, the world as they knew it – the political world, the religious world, the social world, had ended with the fall of the Temple.

And this is common throughout apocalyptic literature. In the Bible, most talk of the end of the world comes at a time, as in our reading from Ezekiel (and the Book of Revelation), when people are exiled, persecuted, devastated. And so, talk of the end of the world is comforting: the message is that although their lives as they knew it was over, life still goes on, and one day peace and justice will ultimately prevail.

And so what Jesus is saying is this: When all this happens it will not be the end of the world. It's only the end of the world as we know it.

The first Sunday of Advent – the beginning of the liturgical year – always begins with the end of the world. There's no mention whatsoever of the annunciation, the holy family, the manger. Nothing.

This is the reason: to alert us to the fact that in the readings we hear the next three weeks, Christmas Eve, and Christmas – that mark the birth and first coming of Jesus – that "it's the end of the world as we know it" and we need to "Keep awake! Keep alert!"

Because Christmas is the end of the world as we know it – the materialistic, self-absorbed, divisive world that we know. God is born into the world and takes on our humanity. We call this incarnation, meaning "taking on flesh." God – all powerful, entirely other, enters into our reality, our existence, collapsing the distance between us. Because this happens, things can never be the same.

The incarnation is the end of the world as we knew it.

As we look much farther into the future, Easter and Jesus' resurrection will again be the end of world as we knew it. Everything we thought we knew about life and death will be called into question and flipped upside down. Death and despair no longer have the final word because this God, who entered our reality in Jesus, will submit to death...and then defy death and rise again.

To capture this sense of change, the Gospel writer Mark uses the phrase "torn apart." When Jesus is baptized, the heavens are torn apart, God speaks and the dove descends. When Jesus dies, the curtain separating the Holy of Holies in the Temple from the rest of the world, is torn apart.

As one commentator writes, "That which separates us from God, either the heavens or the holy of holies, has been torn asunder and can never go back to the way it was before. ...the conviction that there is no keeping God at a distance anymore. God is not and will not be where we expect to find God."

What this means is when we find moments we think our worlds are ending – and we've all been there – its not the end of the world, its only the end of the world as we once knew it.

When our Temples are destroyed.

When our center of gravity is lost and we are displaced and feel scattered.

When things and people we count on let us down, disappoint, or betray us.

When we fail others – and ourselves.

When we receive a diagnosis, or word that a loved one has died, especially now, when often, we cannot be with them

It can feel like the end of the world.

But its not.

First, because Jesus was born right into the middle of it – into human form and into the complexity of human relationship. Jesus knows those places intimately – he himself was followed, celebrated, shunned, hated, betrayed, and misunderstood – and he is there now. Indeed, most present in the hard places.

And second, because Jesus died and rose again, new life is possible. What we think is the end really isn't. And I really don't think the answer is to be found in the young women on my doorstep who warned that we are in the end times now. It never helps to look at the corruption in the world, but our saving grace is beyond the now and into the future. I'd rather look for the new life that is possible.

There is something on the other side of whatever it is we're experiencing.

On the other side is life.

Advent ushers in the end of the world as we know it.

This is what we prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate new life at Christmas.

This is why we keep awake. To see new life happen in the birth of Christ.

But also, to see new life happening in us.

Amen.