

Sermon

Proper 28B      November 17, 2024

Mark 13:1-8

We are almost at the end of Ordinary Time and Advent is only two weeks away. Advent is the beginning of the new Church year and we will go from Year B to Year C on December 1. We will also move from Ordinary Time – that long, green season focusing on the life of Jesus – to Liturgical Time – the time of seasonal and color changes that focus on the events of Jesus’ life. The year begins with Advent because that is the time we anticipate and prepare for the coming of Christ – both in what was (his birth) and what is yet to be (his coming again).

For the past two weeks we have heard gospel stories that come from Jesus’ last days on earth. This is from what we now call Holy Week, and they are, in a way, preparing the disciples for his ultimate departure. This theme of Advent preparation, then, actually begins a little before Advent.

Last week we heard the story of Jesus in the temple watching as people put money into the treasury. Amongst all the commotion and fanfare of wealthy people putting in amounts that could be both seen *AND* heard came a lonely widow who literally put in her last penny. I imagine this woman coming in and trying not to be seen. I imagine her being ashamed for not being able to contribute more. And I imagine her trying to leave before being noticed. But Jesus noticed, and he commended her willingness to put God above everything else in her life. This story isn’t about giving our last penny to the Church, but about asking us to see God as the widow saw God. How are we preparing ourselves to follow God over and above everything else in our lives?

Today’s passage comes immediately after last week’s story. Jesus and the disciples are leaving the temple when they point out to him the grandeur of it all. Jesus is less-than-impressed when he says it will all be thrown down. “When will this be?” they ask.

Everyone is concerned with the last days or end times. Thousands of books have been written about it, prophecies and interpretations have been made, televangelists have made millions by spouting end-time scenarios. And you know what they all have in common? They’ve all been wrong. Every. Single. Time. They’ve all been comically and disastrously wrong.

From the Millerites in 1844 to Harold Camping in 2011. From the London Fire in 1666 to Joanna Southcott in 1813. From The Late, Great Planet Earth of Hal Lindsey to the blood moons of John Hagee. End time prophecies and predictions have a 100 percent failure rate. And yet people keep predicting and people keep following and people keep sending money.

People ask me, "Are these the end times?" I always tell them, "It's the end time for someone."

In today's gospel, the disciples are trying to find out when the end times will take place. Jesus, rather than giving them a time, talks about being prepared. Being prepared does not mean blindly following those who preach and guarantee a specific end of days; but it does mean having the wherewithal to discern messages.

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Why not? Because humans have been at war for almost our entire history. The US alone has been involved in 114 military conflicts since the Revolutionary War. To put that another way, the US has been engaged in some form of military conflict for 228 years of its existence. While this indicates our willingness to use military force, it does not indicate the end times.

There will be earthquakes and famines. The earth is geologically alive, earthquakes and volcanoes happen. Continental drift and slippage occur causing great damage. The land surrounding the Pacific Ocean is known as the Ring of Fire due to the number of volcanoes. But St. Helens, Etna, Vesuvius, Krakatoa, and others, did not usher in the end times. Neither did the earthquakes of San Francisco in 1908, Anchorage in 1964, or Tokyo.

Many will come in my name and say, "I am he," and they will lead many astray.

As I pointed out earlier, many people have led many others astray, either by their false claims of knowing when the end will occur or by their false claims of being the messiah. Jim Jones and David Koresh come to mind. There have also been, and will continue to be, political leaders who sway their followers and lead them astray with promises that they are the only ones who can save the people from whatever mess they seem to be in, while also denigrating and demonizing anyone who is different or who opposes them.

A final note about end time predictions and beliefs: these are often based in escapist fantasies. That is, some people have such a strong belief that the world is going to hell in a handbasket that they will grasp at anything or anyone who promises them an easy way out. It's much easier to believe you will be whisked away from all this and into salvation than it is to do the hard work of living out and into the examples of Christ in the here and now.

Jesus is preparing his disciples and us for the end times, but those end times are not coming as you might think. His preparation isn't about reading the signs of the times as guideposts to destruction. His preparation has to do with discernment. Do these people claiming to be the messiah live into the message of the gospel? Do they love their neighbors? Do they work to feed, clothe, shelter, and visit those in need? If they don't act and speak the message of Christ as found in the gospels, then they are antichrist.

The end is surely coming. And when it does the Lord will make a feast of rich food for all people. He will swallow up death forever. The home of God will be among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God and they will be his people. Every tear will be wiped away and all things will be made new.

The end is surely coming. It's our job to discern if that is based on the revenge fantasies of people, or if it's based in the love of God. Learn to discern, and then live your life as the God of love calls us to.

Amen.