

“Endings and Beginnings”
 delivered Sunday, November 15, 2009
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 Mark 13:1-8

The lead in to a New York Times Magazine article entitled “The Final Days,” reads:
 “A growing community of amateur scholars believes that the world as we know it will come to an end in 2012, as prophesied by the ancient Mayans.” The article contains stories about people all over the country who really believe we should expect some cataclysmic occurrence in the near future. One is convinced that the ancient volcano under Yellowstone National Park is preparing to erupt, another is forecasting a magnetic pole shift, and a popular radio program called “Coast to Coast AM” which draws these apocalyptic believers into community with one another begins its broadcast with these words, “be prepared, not scared.” (1)

If you don’t put a lot of credence in these presumably scientific signs of a major event that will end life on earth as we know it, you cannot help but notice that many Americans are at least enjoying being entertained by the notion. There are number of new, highly publicized television shows that I have not watched, but couldn’t help but notice the hype about their premiers – Flash Forward in which people wake up after some kind of black-out – now able to see into their futures, and V: Visitors from Beyond which unfolds a drama of the earth being invaded by another human species. And at the theaters, 2012 was the big opening, this weekend about the end of the world. Cormac McCarthy’s book, The Road, is coming out as a movie this month. While I probably will choose not to see that film, I will admit when I read The Road I could barely put it down – a haunting description of love between a father and son trying to survive in a world made hostile, following some vast and devastating, earth-rending catastrophe.

Of course this fascination with the end times is nothing new, but it’s worth paying attention to the seasons in which apocalyptic visions seem to capture the imagination. Typically, such interest is more prevalent during periods of crisis – such as war, or economic instability, pandemics of disease, or rapid change. It would appear one of those seasons is now.

Even if you are not particularly worried about Yellowstone erupting, or the Mayan prophecy that the world will end in two years, not one of us is immune to the rapid changes coming our way. Take for example these dramatic shifts in communication: it took Radio 38 years to reach 50 million people, it took Television 13 years to reach 50 million viewers, and Facebook, which began in a college dorm room, reached 100 million participants in nine months. ABC began broadcasting in 1948, and the total viewing hours logged by ABC over 60 years was surpassed by You Tube in the past six months. The top ten in-demand jobs in 2010...did not exist in 2004. Today, the number of words in the English language is five times more than in Shakespeare’s day, and very soon, China will become the largest English speaking country in the world. We are currently preparing high school and college students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet. (2)

There is no question that ours is a time in which the future is coming at us fast, and we are quite unsure of what the implications mean. Are these signs of the end of the world? They are certainly signs that the world as we know it is rapidly becoming a whole new world. It is into this kind of earth-rending change and upheaval that the Bible utters apocalyptic speech. Our reading today from Mark’s gospel is part of a chapter scholars have termed the “Little Apocalypse”

because Jesus is talking about the end times. A first glance paints a strange and troubling picture because it darkly portends cataclysm, and because Jesus rarely uses such language. We are used to Jesus' pronouncements about love and forgiveness, his parables and stories, and even words of judgment, but this is a different form of speech altogether. Here Jesus sounds more like the prophets of old who addressed communities in crisis at times of great stress. This kind of speech is intended to lift the veil that normally covers the world, and give voice to bold visions which cast contemporary events upon a cosmic scale.

I'm not sure it's such a great lesson to read a few weeks out from Stewardship Dedication Sunday when there are still a number of pledges yet to come in – to hold before the church this vision of desolation when, according to Jesus, the whole thing will be blown to bits and the towers of religion will be thrown down stone by stone. But the lesson appointed for this day grabbed me precisely because it speaks to the deepest level of why we invest in the church.

Jesus and his disciples were coming out of the Temple in Jerusalem – that big, impressive structure which, like this one, sat in the middle of a busy intersection in peoples' lives. It provided the sacred space in which people of faith acted out their commitments. One of the disciples looked around at the interior decorating and the paint job and the nice new sign out front. He might have noticed how many families with young children were going up and down the portico, and he made a perfectly innocent comment about its grandeur, how well it was being kept up, and what a difference this worship space made in the community. To this nice and innocent observation, Jesus replied: "You think so? Well, let me tell you something. Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." It's as if he is saying, "Don't start thinking that the particular temple you serve is an end in itself, no matter how successful this year's stewardship drive!" "Don't you forget that the church does its work, and always has, with a cataclysmic end in mind, a devastation we cannot even fathom."

Needless to say, Jesus intends to get our attention! He sure got the attention of the early church. But Mark's community would have heard in Jesus' ominous words, if they were as insightful as Mark hoped they would be, that this was not really about the apocalypse; it was already the front page of the morning paper. It wasn't so much a prediction of their trials in the future, as it was a snapshot of their trouble in the present. They already knew persecution from without, insecurity within, preachers with silver tongues trying to siphon off believers and offering them a Christ without a cross, others trying to wed the faith to the nation and thus offer a patriotic ideology, people saying they were Christian but not really committed, not really living lives that reflected the love, mercy and justice of Christ himself. They were already worried about the destruction of the world as they knew it, the kind of devastation of their community that came with war. All of the insecurity about what was happening in their world was there already in Mark's day, just as in ours, on the front page.

So what were they – and what are we – to conclude from all of it? That the chaos we experience in this world is the beginning of the end? No – and this is the remarkable thing about these words from Jesus, because even in their image of total devastation, they resound with hope. "This," Jesus said, "is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Not the beginning of the end, but "the beginning of the birth-pangs! The beginning of the beginning!"

The power and meaning in these end-of-the-world-kind of words is they "take seriously" the reality of present sufferings. There is no denial of the uncertainty and insecurity we feel. But they also promise that in the economy of God everything has a purpose...Suffering does not lead to despair, but to hope, to the anticipated dawn of God's new day. Entrusted with this kind of Apocalyptic language, the church has the unique position to speak about our moments of loss

and rapid change, about how our world seems to be coming unglued, about our personal experiences of grief and painful endings – because the church has speech that puts the word "birth-pangs," at every ending.

When anything comes to an end there is pain. When anything important to us comes to an end, whether it be death, the end of a relationship, divorce, retirement, a diagnosis that puts an end to good health, or the concern that the future is such a vast unknown for which we are not prepared, there is pain, and stress and uncertainty. The gospel word for any such ending is birth-pang. The pain may be unbearable for a time, but it gives birth to something new.

Let those on the outside of the church, who scratch their heads in bewilderment wondering what difference it makes in the long run, that a church like this one is bothering to care for those at the margins of our culture, and we'll just keep on caring for those who are ill, walking the CROP Walk for those who are hungry, rehabbing houses for those who are homeless. We'll just keep on - letting loose from time to time this strange and peculiar language that speaks with disruptive, prophetic power. Because we understand that in the hands of God, every small act of faithfulness is ushering in a new creation.

One of Robert Fulghum's books is about how life is a series of little deaths and revivals. "Some part of us is always dying," he says. "Nevertheless, most of us seem to be stubborn about surviving these lesser deaths, finding ways to get up off our knees and get on with it. We reach out to find new ways and new friends and new places and new reasons for scrambling on. Revival is a lifelong ritual." And then he asserts: "Nothing about being human amazes me more than this capacity for revival. How dull and meaningless and hopeless life can seem, only to become exciting, vibrant, and filled with hope the very next day. For all our little deaths, we defy our fate and come to life again and again, and yet again."

Our capacity for revival, for renewal, for resurrection, has everything to do with the hope God puts before us. For whatever the future holds for us, however uncertain it may seem to feel, we can be assured of this: any pathway of confusion or devastation or suffering leads through God's grace – so that any ending is always and ultimately God's new beginning. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Benjamin Anastas, "The Final Days," New York Times Magazine, 7/1/07.
- 2) Karl Fisch, Globalization and Information Age, YouTube, 2008.
- 2) Robert Fulghum, From Beginning to End, The Rituals of Our Lives, p. 229 ff.