

Temples and Terrors

Texts: **Mark 13:1-13; Hebrews 10: 11-25**; “*Happily ever after*”, Stephen King

“It’s not the end of the world!” How often do parents say that to their children when the kids are upset? In my house growing up, we heard that quite a lot. But after reading today’s Bible text, well, it may be the end of the world!

Texts like the one we heard today are called apocalyptic texts. The word apocalyptic comes from Greek, and it means to uncover. The book of Revelation is sometimes called The Apocalypse because it uncovers things about the end times. That’s what our text in Mark seems to be doing today: Jesus is telling his disciples about what’s coming.

People throughout the ages have looked at texts like this and have said, “hey, that sounds like our time.”

Are there false teachers of Christianity around? Yes, yes there are! Check! Are there people claiming to be the Messiah, saying that they personally are the solution to people’s problems? Yes, I can think of a couple. Check! Are there wars going on in the world? Let me check the paper here. Sure looks like it. Check. How about rumors of wars? Well, I just read about some secret wars on Facebook, so rumors of wars, check! Are there earthquakes in various places? Earthquaketrack.com says that there have been 116 earthquakes in the past 24 hours, and 890 earthquakes in the past week, and 4,344 earthquakes in the last month, and 58,988 earthquakes in the last year. So, I think we can put a big checkmark by earthquakes on our list. How about famines? Are there famines like Jesus said would happen in the end times? The United Nations says that at least 41 million people are facing famine in the world today. Famines? Check! How about persecutions? Well, Christians aren’t being persecuted here in the United States, but worldwide, it’s happening. Christianity Today reports that, on average, every day, 13 Christians are killed somewhere in the world because of their faith, 12 churches are burned down, 12 Christians are arrested and imprisoned for their faith, and another 5 are abducted. Persecutions? Happening! Check!

We just went through the short list of events that Jesus said would happen before the end could come. These are just the birth pangs, he said, meaning just the preparation for what is going to happen. So should we sell our homes and go up on a mountain to wait? Is it the end of the world? Probably not.

From earliest times, people have been seeing signs of the end. Certainly the first disciples thought that Jesus would return within their lifetimes. Some of the thinking in the early church reasons about social issues based on the idea that they were the last generation. Should we act to abolish slavery? No need, God’s got this. Jesus is coming soon and it will all be done for us. What about marriage? Well, marry if you must, but it’s not really necessary because this is the last generation anyway. But it’s better to marry than to burn, so go ahead if you want. What about people who die before Jesus comes back? Are they lost forever? No, when Jesus comes back, we who are alive and remain will meet him in the air, and then the dead in Christ shall rise. They are just sleeping until Christ wakes them up from death.

And so it went. But time went on, too, and Jesus didn’t return, so they wrote the story of his life down into the gospels, including the predictions we heard in Mark today.

Around AD 70, it looked like the end might be coming. There was a Jewish revolt starting in AD 66, which the Romans put down. As punishment, the Romans destroyed the Temple. The only part left standing is the famous wailing wall in Jerusalem, which was actually a retaining wall set around the Temple. The building where Jesus taught, the building that Jesus' disciples stopped to admire that day, that building is gone, and has been for a long time. Every stone was thrown down, but still Jesus didn't appear.

As the year 1000 approached, some people thought it might be the end of the Millennium predicted in the Bible, and that the end would come then. It didn't, but you probably knew that.

In the 13th century, Joachim of Fiore thought that he had discovered a pattern to time, and he divided all time into three ages: the age of the Father, which took place in the Old Testament; the age of the Son, which was from Jesus' era up until Joachim's; and the age of the Holy Spirit, which was imminent. After that came the end.

The end didn't come.

In the 1820's a farmer living in northeastern New York, William Miller, thought he had deciphered the meaning of Scripture from Daniel. He set the date of the return of Christ for 1843. Miller wrote a series of articles about his expectation, and started a national movement which included Millerite newspapers in many cities, including right here in Cleveland. Thousands of people were waiting for Jesus' return on the date Miller finally settled on: October 22, 1844. That date has gone down in history with the name The Great Disappointment, for obvious reasons.

Some people claimed that Jesus had in fact appeared in Mother Ann Lee, and a sect of Shakers was born. Others continued to hold on to the teaching and became the Seventh Day Adventists.

In 1970, Hal Lindsey published the book *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It predicted that the end was near, and pointed to the establishment of Israel in 1948 as the key moment that set the countdown clock ticking. Within a generation of Israel's founding, he said, Christ would return. 1988 was the date then. But 1988 came and went, and still no Jesus.

It's not surprising that no one has gotten it right yet. Jesus himself said, "No one knows the hour or the day of my coming, but only the Father alone." So, based on that saying, if you just *know* that Jesus is coming tomorrow, he isn't. No one knows when he will return, but Christians have been expecting him ever since he said these words that Mark records.

If we read what Jesus said a little more closely, we can see that he actually tells his disciples that all these signs must happen, but the end is still to come after them. The signs point to the end, but aren't the end!

So if this passage isn't about setting our calendars for the apocalypse, when Jesus will be revealed, what is it about? It starts out with the disciples admiring the buildings of the Temple. The Temple represents the way things were. It was religious bedrock. It was stability. It was all about things staying the same. "Look at these huge stones! Nothing could move them! Look at these massive buildings! They must surely be permanent! It's impossible to imagine them every being thrown down."

The Temple represents the world going on as it always has. It represents religious authority, it represents the framework within which any change must come. The Temple is the world as it is: solid, immovable, impressive. And Jesus' message is, the world isn't as unchangeable as you think it is. It seems unimaginable that it could be different than it is right now. Some problems seem too great to

overcome, and some institutions seem too great to ever disappear. But the Temple came down, and Rome fell, and slavery disappeared from the United States, and the Nazis were defeated, and the solid, immovable, overwhelming present gave way to a future no one had imagined even a few years before.

Followers of Jesus may find themselves in a world that is very much to their liking. We might be impressed by the churches we have built, or by the Christian foundations of our nation, or by some other thing that seems solid, unchangeable, magnificent, and impressive. But Jesus says, "Don't think that's going to last."

Or we may find that we live in a time when the problems seem overwhelming, when the issues of the day are so great, so intractable, that they are like the Temple: impressive to the point of being overwhelming. They seem like they could never be resolved, never be fixed, never disappear without one stone left on top of the other. Maybe we think of poverty, or racism, or sexism, or the political divide in our nation. Maybe we look at the climate problem and think it's just so massive, so immovable, that we won't be able to succeed at changing things. And Jesus says to us, "That can change. It's not as immovable as you think."

But he warns us, too, that change is hard. He warns us that it involves a lot of upheaval, that it will involve people trying to co-opt every good movement to exalt themselves as the messiah, that change will involve conflict and it may seem like the very foundations of the world are shaking, because they are. But all of this disruption, all of this turning of everything upside down, well that's just the birth pangs of the new world that is about to be born. The new world that God is birthing into being is coming, though there may be quite a few birth pangs in between.

But Jesus wants his people not to give up hope. He's already told us not to get too comfortable if we like this world, and not to get too despairing if its problems seem too great to be moved. He's already told us that change is going to come, and that there will be some that don't like it, and some that exploit it, and some who hang on because they are confident that God is at work in what is happening, giving birth to something new as we wait for Christ's return.

Every age sees signs that it could be the end time. Every age sees part of their world as immovable and unchangeable, for good or for bad, and every age also contains the seeds of disruption, the possibility of change. As Christians, our job is to follow Jesus through it all. We won't get too complacent when things are good; we won't get too despairing when things are difficult; and we'll never give up hope that the hard times are birth pangs of a world that is yet to be.

Sometime Christ will return. And when he does, let's hope that he finds Christians hard at work making the world a better place.

Amen