

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
November 29, 2009 (1st Sunday of Advent)
Mark 13:1-8, 24-31
“An Advent Quartet: Mark’s Warnings”

A standard character in many comic strips is the bearded man walking down the sidewalk holding a sign saying “The end is near!” We never quite know what to do with end of the world predictions. On the other hand, we’re not much better at knowing what to do when airliners crash into the World Trade Towers, or the levees break flooding New Orleans, or the stock market falls 300 points in one day and the 150-year old Lehman Brothers suddenly goes bankrupt. Voices predicting the end of the world are like the pounding chords in Chopin’s Prelude in C minor. Sometimes the pounding chords make sense; sometimes events justify their ominous melody. But pounding chords or tragedies are never the full story. Chopin’s short prelude changed its tune quickly, just as Jesus began his speech with words about wars, famine and earthquakes, but then went on to say something much more significant.

According to Mark’s gospel, Jesus made an unsettling prediction about the fate of the Jerusalem temple. He told his disciples that a day would come when not one stone would be left upon another. It’s as if I shook your hands at the sanctuary exit and then said, “Enjoy the church, for soon it is going to be torn down.” You would likely walk to your cars wondering about my sanity, hoping that I wouldn’t soon join the cast of late-night preachers predicting the end of the world. And yet we live in a post-9/11 world, a post-Hurricane Katrina world. We know we cannot fully dismiss warnings of bad times to come because, frankly, sometimes they do come.

When Mark’s gospel was written, Jesus’ predictions were in the midst of being fulfilled. The four decades between Jesus’ earthly ministry and the year 70 AD included wars and rumors of war, false Messiahs shouting their “end of the world” messages, and militant Zealots calling Jews to take up arms against their Roman oppressors. In time the great temple of Jerusalem would be sacked and burnt by Roman legions. And the story goes that as the fire raged, its heat would melt the piles of gold stored in the temple, causing looting soldiers to later pry the stones apart to get the melted gold hidden in its cracks; so in the end, not one stone was left upon another.

Someone speaks words prophesying doom, and sometimes they come true. How then are we supposed to live? For some people, it means we are to live believing the worst of others, bracing ourselves for whatever disaster is lurking just around the corner. On a humorous note, Mark Twain supposedly sent short telegrams to a dozen prominent men, all of whom packed their bags and left town immediately. The telegrams said: “Flee at once – All is discovered.”¹ Some of this cynical spirit marks the question Andrew asked Jesus as they sat on the Mount of Olives looking at the doomed city of Jerusalem. Andrew quietly asked Jesus, “When will this time of destruction come? Give me some advance warning. Tell me what sort of signs will precede the final days so I can be ready.”

¹ New York Times, February 12, 2006, “Word for Word Column”, Week in Review, p. 7.

Andrew's questions seem quite reasonable; in fact, if we were in his sandals, we'd likely be tempted to ask Jesus the exact same thing. But they ultimately miss the point. Jesus did his healing miracles, not so that people would worship him as a heaven-sent wonderworker, but so that people would learn to trust the power and presence of a loving God, who is able to breathe new life into our broken human existence. In the same way, Jesus didn't predict the destruction of Jerusalem so that people would huddle around him in fear, hoping he had inside information on how to save them from times of trouble. No, he spoke about wars, earthquakes, and times of trouble to remind people about the God who is Lord over the entire arc of history. That's why Jesus' response to Andrew is not to tell him to go hide in a cave or build a bomb shelter behind his house, but rather to pray for discernment, so that no one will lead him astray or distract him from this deeper trust in the eternal justice and power of God.

Let's delve deeper into this idea for a moment. One of the least helpful phrases spoken in recent history has been the language about waging a "war on terror." The focus of this war, namely "terror", sets up too ambiguous a military target. And supposedly for this war to end, we would need to have a lasting peace without any threat of terror, which is too broad a goal for it ever to be attained. This type of saber-rattling rhetoric is self-serving and at odds with our faith tradition. As one commentator on this passage put it, the war against terror has been held up as a necessary crusade to save civilization. But "even if the world could be freed of terrorists, would the world that remained – with its gaping chasms between rich and poor," its billions of women and children denied education, its wealth and power concentrated in the hands of the few to the exclusion of the many – would that world reflect God's intended goal for all creation?² No, of course not.

The language about the end of the world, about wars and earthquakes, the sun darkened and the stars falling from the heavens, is not spoken by Jesus to scare folks into following him as the one who has all the answers and who alone can help them win a war against terror. No, Jesus makes his prediction to point to the God who is the Lord of all relationships and of all history. And his words emphasize that there is a disconnect between our structures of power and authority and God's power and authority. That is why capturing all the terrorists will not bring peace on earth; getting everyone to shop boisterously for Christmas will not cure our nation's financial woes; and electing a black President does not mean that racism is no longer a problem in our country. Jesus' words tell us that sometimes the very structures we've been depending on for a long time, like temples made of stone and gold bars stashed away in Swiss bank vaults, have to all come tumbling down so that a new structure of God's own making can be erected in their place.

Here's one example of how our current vision of the world can be dramatically challenged by a different vision of the world. Fiorello LaGuardia served three terms as mayor of New York City, and was much beloved for his hands-on approach to governance. One bitterly cold night in January 1935, he turned up at a night court that served the poorest part of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took

² Pete Peery, [Feasting on the Word](#), (Proper 28) Mark 13:1-8, Homiletical Perspective, p. 311.

over the bench himself. Soon an old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick and the grandchildren were starving. However, the shopkeeper insisted she be punished to teach others a lesson back in that rough neighborhood. LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions: \$10 or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his hat saying: "Here's payment for the \$10.00 fine. Furthermore I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." The next day the newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, 50 cents of which being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some 70 petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents, gave the mayor a standing ovation.³

Jesus' warnings in Mark's gospel are not doomsday predictions about future tragedies. They are not simply pounding minor chords designed to fill us with spirits of fear and despair. Like Chopin, Jesus' opening melody softens into a different tune. He wants us to realize that the structures of this world are not the same as the structures of God's intended world. [Isaiah 55: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord."] That's why he turns to softer images, feminine images to be precise. He warns that tragedies will occur in this life, but they are like the "beginning of birth pangs." They are like the fig tree whose green leaves foretell that a season of fruit and harvest is about to begin. Things are passing away; old structures are collapsing. But something new is about to be born. Something wonderful is coming.

A deeper reality is at work in our very midst if we have the eyes to see it and the hearts and spirits to accept it in. That's what Jesus was trying to tell the others. That's the whole message of the season of Advent. During these four weeks, we light candles and wait expectantly. We are led to a surprising birth in Bethlehem - God born among us - which causes the very power structures and foundations of earth to shake and collapse.

Something radically new has happened - believe the good news. Something radically new is still happening - look around with eyes of faith. And in time, something radically new will be completed by the Lord who has said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Therefore, watch. Be prepared. A new world is being born before our very eyes. And each of you is a part of it. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

³ Re-told by James N. McCutcheon, "The Righteous and the Good," Best Sermons 1: ed., James W. Cox (San Francisco, 1988), pp. 238-39.