

Mark 13:1-8, 32-37

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Looking for Signs November 25, 2018

A priest and a rabbi from local parishes were standing by the side of the road holding up signs. The rabbi’s sign read, “The End is Near!”

The priest, on the other side of the road, held up a sign which read, “Turn before it’s too late!” They planned to hold up their signs to each passing car.

“Get a job,” The first driver yelled at them when he saw the sign.

The second driver, immediately behind the first, yelled, “Leave us alone you religious freaks!”

Shortly, from around the curve, the two clergy heard screeching tires and a splash followed by more screeching tires and another splash. The rabbi looked over at the priest and said, “Do you think we should try a different sign?”

The priest responded thoughtfully, “Perhaps our signs ought to say simply ‘The Bridge is Out.’”

One of my favorite movies is *Bruce Almighty* starring Jim Carrey and Morgan Freeman. Jim Carrey plays Bruce who is a very frustrated TV reporter and Morgan Freeman plays God. There is a telling moment when Bruce, who has just had an argument with his girlfriend, played by Jennifer Aniston, goes for a drive, and as he is driving he begins to ask God for help. He says things like, “Ok God. You want me to talk to you? Then talk back. Tell me what’s going on. What do you want me to do? Lord, give me a signal. At that very moment, we see through the windshield a neon sign flashing, “Caution Ahead!” Bruce is completely oblivious to the warning sign and says, “God, I need your help. I need your guidance. God, please. Send me a sign.” At which point a very large work truck loaded with signs pulls out in front of him. The signs say, ‘Stop! Wrong Way! Dead End! Do Not Enter!’ Bruce again completely ignores what is right in front of him and passes the truck only to hit a pothole that he was being warned about and crashes into a light pole. Sometimes we don’t see the signs even when they are right in front of us.

Now, I believe that God gives us signs along the way if we are awake and paying attention. They don’t always mean what we think they mean and sometimes we just flat out misinterpret them.

Our passage this morning is what theologians call “Apocalyptic Eschatology.” “Eschatology” is the study of the “last things or the end times.” and “Apocalyptic” which means a revelation, unveiling, or uncovering. The last book of the Bible, which we call “Revelation” is also titled “Apocalypse,” or the “Apocalypse of John.” It is a genre of literature that is meant to be read symbolically or allegorically within its historical context. It is a genre that reminds not only the first readers but for us as well, that there is hope in the midst of suffering and oppression. That God has the last word in histories unveiling. That birth comes in the midst of life’s difficulties and tragedies.

The disciples are wowed by the size of the temple. It is an impressive place and is the house of God! The very thought that it would be gone someday is beyond belief. As they sit with Jesus looking at this great temple they ask him about his prophecy of this ending. “When will this be? What signs should we look for?” they asked. A question maybe you have asked as well as you hear about the struggles and conflict around the world in the daily news.

Pastors often have these types of encounters as we visit with many folks from diverse religious backgrounds. I often have conversations with those who see the world in this type of cosmic ‘good versus evil’ battle and that it must be the end times. What is the world coming to? Wars, violence, flooding, immorality, Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas!” The end is near!

And I can never quite figure out if this prediction of the end times is one of excitement for those who pronounce it or one of complete resignation. Are they looking forward to it or is there a hopelessness that says in effect, “I quit! I’ll throw up my hands and let the world go to heck in a handbasket?”

Now I can sympathize with that type of thinking but I don’t think that is what Jesus wants us to be focusing on even though we often feel that way. Those who choose to think this way seem to be working from a perspective that there is nothing they can do to change the world or the violence in it and I think Jesus would disagree. In fact, he tells us to not be alarmed; to not be afraid. These things are just the birth pangs of things to come, of God’s creating something new on the horizon and that we should stay awake to that. That we shouldn’t live in despair about the condition of the world, which has been made difficult by our own choices and priorities. But that we as his children should look for him in every place where it seems all is lost

Isn’t that what Mark is trying to tell his own community? A community that has endured endless persecution and who either has seen, or will see, Jerusalem surrounded by Rome’s armies, starved out, people slaughtered, and the temple burned to the ground and those big stones pulled down and splintered to pieces. Do you think they might have been thinking, “This is the end of life as we know it?” And indeed it was for many. But there was also new life that came from that. A new beginning came about especially for the young Christian church as it moved out of Jerusalem and into the greater world. And even though it felt like it was time for Jesus to come again, he didn’t. And Jesus cautions his disciples about listening to and following those, who claim to know the time and place of the end of all things.

Jesus made it very clear that nobody knows when the end of time will be. It might be tomorrow. It might be 10,000 years from now. Nobody knows! Foolish people keep setting dates, but so far they’ve been totally wrong. If you run into somebody determined to announce how soon the end will come, ask them if they think they are smarter than Jesus, for Jesus said even he didn’t know when it would be.

And yet we are fascinated by this type of apocalyptic ending to all things, aren’t we? We are even entertained by it. We enjoy movies and books like, “The Left Behind series, The Walking Dead, The Late Great Planet Earth,” movies depicting the end of life as we know it and where those who don’t believe as we do finally get what is coming to them. Even some of our well-meaning sisters and brothers use this idea to frighten and alarm

others into accepting their understanding of God and Jesus. And many seem to be looking for signs and interpreting the disasters and violence of our time as indicators that Jesus will soon return and set all things right. And sadly, in some cases, we begin to remove ourselves from the world and those in it because it will all end anyway.

But I believe that the signs we should be looking for are not those that indicate the end of the world but those that encourage us to love one another and perhaps provoke us to act on God's behalf in the world. Stop looking for the end of things and start living in ways that reflect God's restorative and loving purpose for all creation. God is not going to destroy the earth that he loves. The promise is for a new earth and a new heaven which is about transformation, not annihilation. Jesus reminds us today that our lives and history are in God's hands and God's time and no one knows when the end will come. And be assured that whatever or whenever it happens you don't need to worry about it.

But there are signs and messages for you if you but stay awake and keep your eyes peeled! St. Teresa of Avila once noted that "Christ dwells among the pots and pans." It was her way of saying that if we don't bump into Jesus in the run of a typical day, we maybe won't run into him much at all. And professor David Lose commented that "We are called to live *now*, allowing the promises of God about the future to infuse our every present moment. Because when you live looking for the activity of God here and now, you begin to see it. In an act of kindness of a friend, in an opportunity to help another, in the outreach ministry of a congregation, in the chance to listen deeply to the hurt of another. God shows up in all kinds of places, working with us, for us, through us, and in us. You just have to look. When will this happen? Now. What will be the sign? When you see people acting as Jesus did. Even here. Even now."

I want to leave you with one last story about signs that I hope will give you comfort in this world. It's a story I've shared before that happened a few years ago but the memory of it still moves me. You may remember it.

In our master bathroom, we have a fairly large mirror that sits over the sink. Most mornings when we take a shower, the bathroom, as one would expect, fills with steam from the shower. On one morning I was getting ready to shave and the mirror was, as usual, fogged up. I thought it would be cute to write something in the misty mirror, so across the top, I wrote: "I Love You!" I was curious to see how long it would take Anna to see it and hoped she wouldn't be mortified that I had written on her clean mirror.

But the funny thing was when the steam cleared out of the bathroom, you couldn't see the message anymore. The only time it appeared was when the mirror fogged up again and if you weren't actually paying attention you could miss it completely. It was a couple of weeks before Anna noticed. The secret message made her smile and rather than clean the mirror she left a message of her own.

I admit, I too, was not paying attention and it was a couple weeks before I saw her response which was written under my message which said, "I Love You Too!" The love letters stayed on the mirror for a long time, only to be revealed when the mirror was fogged up. And it had me thinking that this may be similar to how we experience God's signs of love as well, particularly when things seem hopeless.

When our lives are filled up with the foggiest of distractions, confusion about our lives, danger and worry, fearfulness, unconfessed sin, and fears about the world both real and imagined, somehow in that foggiest God has a message for us all. And that message is, "I Love You!" I can imagine God saying, "Sometimes you don't see it because you are distracted, but if you will stay awake; if you will pay attention, even in the foggiest of times, you will see me everywhere.

You will see me in those who care for others. You will see me in those who say, "Hello. It's so nice to see you." You will see me in a meal shared, in a hand held, in a story read to a young child or a shut-in, in a prayer

offered, in a card sent for no reason other than I was thinking of you, in a phone call, a batch of cookies, a bag of groceries, a cup of coffee with a friend or stranger.

You will find me when you really look for me. And I will tell you that life is a struggle at times. That these troubles you see in the world are just birth pangs that are preparing the way for something new, something that will break into the world in a miraculous and mysterious way, something that we yearn for, and look for, as we approach the season of Advent, which is just a week away. Keep looking! Keep Awake! Don't let others draw your attention away from me. Don't let others frighten you about what may come. The messages of my love are all around you! Shalom! Don't be afraid. I love you! God." Amen.