

## **In The End...**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28, Year B, RCL  
November 15, 2009

It seems that there has always been this human fascination with ‘end times’—the time when either the earth itself meets its end, or humankind is endangered, or a great apocalypse of some kind will be taking place. All sorts of movies, from “Independence Day” to the “Day after Tomorrow” to the present “2012” and the soon to be released “The Road” focus on cataclysmic events, whether it be the effects of global warming, an alien invasion, or humankind engineering its own destruction through war and weaponry. We as humans have an instinctive sense that someday, this type of event will come, and we struggle mightily to figure out the when and how so that perhaps we can avert it—or at least, be prepared for it.

In the movie “Knowing”, a carefully encrypted code reveals the when and the where of major disasters, and the final disaster of the end of the world. And despite the lead character’s struggle to warn others, to work to avert it or escape it, in the end it becomes something that can only be accepted—people gathering with their loved ones as the earth meets its end. All the knowledge (or ‘knowing’), all the detailed information, even all the science and resources in the world—none of it could save humankind, the earth, from its fate as presented in this movie. While the movie is fiction, it reveals at least one truth: we remain, as always, fragile creatures on a singular planet in a vast universe—and not the masters of the universe that we secretly long to be.

Jesus’ disciples had the same longings that we have today. They are impressed by the Jerusalem temple—its size and splendor, the human feats of engineering that planned and built this magnificent structure. They look at the size of the stones, the thickness of the walls, the vastness of its size, and they see permanence, a structure built to stand throughout the ages. But Jesus

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informs them not to put their security in big buildings or human structures. It will all come to an end, he says—"all will be thrown down." What seems so sturdy and strong is in fact an illusion—like all things man made, it will meet an end. This information must have been both disconcerting and intriguing to the disciples. The temple was at the center of the Jewish worship system at that time, and they likely could not imagine how their faith would function without a temple. After all, it was considered to be the home of God's presence on earth. Surely, whatever would lead to the destruction of the temple would be a life-changing, society changing event.

And so at first opportunity, safely beyond the walls of the city and eavesdropping ears, Jesus' closest disciples asked Jesus that all important question—when, what are the warning signs? For just like us, they want to be in the know, they want to be prepared, and perhaps to prepare others. Would this come in their lifetime? Or their children's? Would it be precipitated by a particular uprising or war or the death of someone important? Surely, if Jesus knew that there would be an end, he must know when.

As usual, Jesus does not fully address the question—but instead he offers the answers we truly need. First, he warns them (and us) to remain faithful—to not follow the next compelling individual or theory that comes along. In other words, honor your commitment to God in Christ, and do not lose heart when all around you seems to say that your faith has been misplaced. Do not be influenced by those who point to the troubles and suffering in the world as evidence that God must not exist or care; do not follow those who tell you that they and they alone have the only and right path or connection to God. So-called leaders who use fear or shame to motivate,

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who insist that they have all the right answers, or who use their power and authority to better themselves rather than lift others up are not your savior, and they are not worthy of your trust and faith. In contrast, in Christ, we have been shown the true character of God, and also been shown an authentic human life lived in response to God. In Jesus, we have been shown a God who willingly enters into the world to save and transform it, a God who desires to meet people where they are, as they are, so that they may be invited into a relationship of love and thus changed. Jesus forces no one's hand; he uses his vast authority and power for the good of others and not to save or promote himself. The one man who truly does have all the right answers did not shove them down others' throats; nor does he stop loving those who walk away from him. This man, this God, our Lord, is worthy of my trust and faith, even if there are days when I lose sight of him in my life—and it is for him that I will wait.

Jesus also offers examples of things that may seem like end-of-the-world events, and tells us not to be alarmed by them. Wars, famines, earthquakes—as well as floods, hurricanes, and even economic collapses—all are anxiety producing events marked by fear and suffering. When in the midst of them, it is easy to lose sight that there is anything beyond. Suffering and pain tend to severely limit our worldview, our God-view, and it is hard to see that there could be good again. Sometimes the destruction around us is so big—whether it be caused by the power of bombs or Category 5 winds—that we may wonder if it is not the end of the world. And truly, for those caught in such events, it is the end of the world to some extent—the end of their world, the world that they knew and loved. It is easy to fall into despair, hard to summon the energy to hope.

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Perhaps that is why Jesus likens these events to the ‘beginning of the birth pangs’. For the analogy he uses is quite appropriate. The time of labor—that in-between time from one state to another—is also a time of pain and suffering. It is were not for the anticipation and hope embedded within this birth process, the anxiety and fear that can accompany it could be overwhelming. Jesus asks us, in the midst of these oft-anxious in-between (laborious?) times, to hold onto hope, to trust that the end, no matter when it comes to us—individually or corporately—is secured by his love, his sacrifice, and leads to new life.

But in all the warnings and signs offered by Jesus in the thirteenth chapter of Mark, perhaps the most important is this: be sure to keep awake. In other words, your biggest concern should not be the date or place of ‘the end’—whether is my end, your end, or the earth’s end—but how you lived your life along the way to that end. For that is the only way we can truly prepare or ‘keep awake’—by pursuing an authentic relationship with God and one another, by accepting God’s great gift of love and forgiveness and living that out in our lives, and in that, working with God to heal a broken world rife with injustice, violence, and suffering. Whether we know of our end or not, that is our call.

And that’s all we really need to know.

Amen.