

Sermon, May 5, 2024
Matthew 24:1- 8

“Surviving the End of the World”

The passage that I just read falls under the category of apocalyptic literature. Other examples of this can be found in the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. So, what purpose does it serve? Well, let's consider the text before us. Jesus is walking out of the Temple in Jerusalem, and he says that all of the temples will be torn down. Of course, that is precisely what would happen when the Roman army tore it down in the year 70 ad. Jesus then goes and sits down on the Mount of Olives, and the disciples come and ask him to tell them when that will happen and what will be the sign of his coming and of the coming of the end of the age. Well, as we know from the 8th chapter of Mark, Jesus is not too fond of those who ask for a sign. The Pharisees put him to the test by asking for a sign “ And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “ Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation”.

I have heard Christians say that paying attention to astrology, wanting to know what the future holds, shows a lack of faith. Well, I think we can say the same about demanding a sign. After all, as we find in the Book of Hebrews, “...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. We place our trust in God, not in supposed signs.

Jesus then warns the disciples to pay no attention to those who would come in his name, some claiming to be the Messiah, and leading them astray. Today, there are many, not necessarily claiming to be the Messiah, but certainly speaking in his name, and proclaiming that we are living in the end times, that Jesus is coming any day now, with some even specifically setting a date. Are they not leading people astray? In the 36th verse of today's chapter Jesus says, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”. How is it that there are those who claim to know what Jesus says he does not know? Only God the Father knows!

In the words of Stanley Hauerwas, “We, along with the disciples, make a disastrous mistake...if we allow our imaginations to be possessed by the image of apocalypse rather than on the one on whom those images are meant to focus our attention, that is, Jesus”.

Jesus then goes on to say that there will be a time when there will be wars, and rumors of war, a time when nation will rise against nation, a time of earthquakes and famines. That certainly describes the world we live in now. But you know what? In the last two thousand years there was barely even a single generation where that was not the case! Jesus even said, “Truly

, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place". The Christians of the first century were convinced that they were living in the end times - or, at least those in the earliest years of the church's history. By the time that the first generation had passed away the Church became more aware that perhaps we are in it for the long haul.

Okay, so if this passage is not giving us specific information about the end times, what is its purpose?

Apocalyptic literature generally arose in times of turbulence, i.e., hard times. The word that best describes what Jesus is doing here is - endurance. That was certainly the case with the first century Church. Under rulers such as the Emperor Nero they faced terrible persecutions. So, Matthew's Gospel, written towards the later part of the first century, is encouraging the people to endure, even in the face of such suffering. But what lies at the heart of that endurance? Faith and hope - in particular, he is telling the disciples to hold on to faith and the hope that there will come a time when the Son of Man will return, bringing an end to their suffering.

But the question is, do we really have to find hope in a future image of Jesus riding in on a cloud, coming to make all things right? In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them". In other words, the spirit of Christ is already in the midst of us, here and now, and in that spirit, we find our hope and the strength to endure.

But if we still cling to the belief of a coming end of the age, what are we meant to be doing in the meantime? Someone once asked Martin Luther what he would do if he knew that the world would be coming to an end tomorrow. He replied, "I would plant a tree!". What he means by that is that we should not be focused on some image of what is to come in the future, but on what Jesus instructed us to do - today - to bring good news to the poor, to let the oppressed go free, to heal the sick, to bring food to the hungry. If there is war, or rumors of war, then we should embrace the blessedness of being peacemakers. I mean, let's face it - if there is to be an end of the age, it will likely be brought on by ourselves through nuclear warfare or environmental catastrophe! That is why we have to focus our attention so strongly on what Jesus is calling us to do - today. If there are earthquakes and famine in the world, are we simply supposed to look on that as a sign of what is to come, or are we called to come to the aid of those affected by such disasters - today?

Whatever the future maybe hold, Jesus wants us to endure, to have faith and hope - today! Amen.

Let us pray: O, God, ever gracious loving and kind, we thank you for this day that you have given us and seek your guidance on what we should do with it. We look to your Son Jesus as our guide, leading us in the ways of love, justice , and peace, and we open our hearts and minds to the inspiration of your Holy Spirit. Help us to bear witness to your love in all that we say and do. Lord, we live now in a world filled with turmoil, and seek your divine wisdom on how we may respond. We lift up in prayer those places in the world that are being torn apart by war, and cry out for peace in Ukraine, in Israel and Gaza, and in Sudan. We also pray for peace on college campuses around the country. Help us to find peaceful means to deal with conflict. Our faith and hope are grounded in you.

Today we lift up before you your servant Lynn Manz and all that he meant to family, friends, and to this congregation. We thank you for having peacefully taken him into your loving embrace and ask that today your loving embrace also be of comfort for Midge , for their children, and for their friends.

We also pray for your comfort and healing for Dale, for Wayne, for Alison, for Patt, and for...
Amen.