



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Birth Pangs of Hope
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 15, 2009
Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Mark 13:1-8

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As (Jesus) 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.

The Regal Cinemas here in town has 14 theaters, and occasionally they expect such a large crowd for a particular film that they will show it in two—or even three—theaters. If you were to go there today, you'd find that only two films fit that description, and only one in the classic sense. You can choose between a 3-D version and the regular version of Disney's new *A Christmas Carol*. Those are shown in different theaters.

The other film, however, surprised me a bit. It's simply called 2012—a movie about the end of the world. If you do a Google search, as I did earlier this week, you'll discover over 52 million hits, some of which describe in great detail how the Mayan calendar predicted that the world will end on December 21, 2012. According to a bunch of articles, people around the world have quit their jobs and are even now preparing for the world to end.

If a movie's popularity is any indication, there's no doubt that many people are consumed with the end times. Countless Christians, even, have set up elaborate systems designed to calculate exactly when Jesus will return and bring the world as we know it to

an end.

For other people, however, that world has already ended. It may have come the morning the towers fell. It might have happened when they doctor held up the x-ray to show them the suspicious spot. It could have happened when their child was arrested.

However it happened, they have somehow lost a foundational belief upon which they once built their lives, and nothing seems certain any longer. Someone reminded me of the poem that William Butler Yeats once wrote that captured this sense of how the world sometimes spins wildly out of control for all of us (Roger Nishioka in *Feasting the Word*). Listen to these opening lines from Yeats' poem called *The Second Coming*:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre (which means circle)

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

You know it as well as I do: the world is spinning wildly these days. Yeats is right, it seems: things fall apart and innocence is drowned as we hear the news of another plant closing and jobs lost. We hear reports from Afghanistan or the saber-rattling from Iran, which is another way of saying we hear talk of wars and rumors of wars. The refrain has become so familiar that we hear the words and think to ourselves, "Just another ordinary week in America."

It's just ordinary time, time that marches on and we give it little thought. You may not have woken up today as I did, feeling overjoyed that we have finally reached the *end* of what the lectionary calls "Ordinary Time." Our sanctuaries have been decked out in green since June, and by now many of us are simply tired of this extended season of monotony. True, there have surely been glimpses of the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary, but, for too many of us, the ordinary times have been just that—too ordinary.

But here's the good news: these ordinary days are coming to an end. And who isn't ready to dance on the grave of these ordinary days? Who among us doesn't long for an end of days that have become ordinary because they speak of wars and rumors of wars? Who among us isn't tired of referring to nation rising against nation as ordinary? Who in the world isn't looking for an end of all ordinary time that is too filled with things that defy God's righteousness and love? Just as preachers shout when Ordinary Time ends in the liturgical year, so will the whole world shout when these transitory days of tears give way to endless days of no tears.

This is what Mark 13 is about. One commentator sums up the chapter well when he writes, "Mark 13 speaks to those who expect too much and to those who expect too little. It is especially pertinent for those who have forgotten to expect anything at all." (Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation Series: Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 243)

We who gathered on the first Sunday of Advent last year heard this word: "Stay awake; watch." And, if we took Jesus seriously, then we have stayed awake through the

liturgical journey from last Advent until now, when Jesus again directs our gaze into the future, and we put the stopwatch to the birth pangs, watching for the new world to be delivered.

The people who first read these words in Mark's Gospel experienced more than their share of birth pangs. Everywhere they looked they saw terror—the violence of war; the destruction of the Temple; persecution against the church; and false prophets leading the church astray. They were a people beaten down by the harsh realities of their existence. What they needed was a radical hope to reframe their reality. What they needed was something to shake them from their fear. What they needed, whether they knew it or not, was as the church's apocalyptic voice. That's the language the church speaks when all hell has broken loose.

I'm convinced that's what our world needs to hear today as well. But we don't seem to get that. No, we keep searching for anything to take our minds off the real stuff of our lives—we may turn to sports, or drugs, or simply someone else's life, which leaves us clamoring for the latest news from Jon and Kate and the countless like them from reality TV. We seem to hunger for something to take our minds off of the wars and rumors of wars and other calamities that mark these days and we don't seem to care what it is, as long as it's easy.

And that may be our problem with apocalyptic language. The apocalyptic voice is not easy to speak or hear, but apocalyptic words have a way of carrying us to a place of hope that we would never find without it.

That is the hope that Jesus spoke in these first verses of Mark 13. He offers his disciples a vision of a world held by a loving God. He paints a picture of a glorious future with God. And while the apocalyptic voice appears to take us out of this world, its purpose is to give us hope for the living of these days. As we will affirm later today, this hope doesn't remove us from the world, but rather plunges us deeper into the struggle for victories over anything which defies the goodness of God.

When Jesus speaks about the destruction of the Temple, the disciples hear a deeper word. They hear Jesus telling them that the world as they knew it was coming to an end. The only future would be God's future. But instead of wringing their hands until that day, the disciples are encouraged to keep the faith and to live as though the promised future of God has already come true.

Given this context, this chapter of Mark's Gospel becomes a new lens to examine these experiences by. In Mark, Chapter 13 follows two chapters that tell of Jesus' final trips to the Temple in Jerusalem. In those chapters, Jesus drives out the traders, overturns the money tables, and gets into all sorts of trouble with the religious leaders. All throughout those chapters we see those same leaders trying to figure out a way to silence Jesus, whose popularity among the people was growing day by day. Jesus, always on the way to the Cross in Mark's Gospel, is nearing the end of his journey.

The prediction of his suffering and death and the Temple conflicts before, the story of the suffering and death after, Chapter 13 serves as Jesus' farewell discourse in Mark. In his words to his disciples, Jesus gives the disciples a radical hope about God's promised future, and that promise transforms the way they are to live in the present.

At times, we in the church have trouble negotiating this tension. We have used the promises of what God is going to do in the future as excuses for doing nothing about present evils.

I remember well the first time that truth really hit home to me. It was in a seminary classroom of all places, when we were discussing the challenge of racism to the church. Without even realizing it, we started to wax poetic about the future glory awaiting God's creation and didn't even notice that we were avoiding the very challenge we thought we were addressing. When she'd had enough, one of the students slammed her hand down on the table and cried, "I'm tired of hearing about justice in the sweet by and by. It's not good enough that there will be justice one day. I want justice now!"

The purpose of apocalyptic language is not to cause the church to sit in a circle, hold hands, and sing endless rounds of "When We All Get to Heaven." There are days to live through and responsibilities to honor until then. We dare not allow our watching for God's promised future to become an escape from the present or from this world that God loves.

Nora Gallagher describes this tension well. She writes, "Sometimes it's as if I were living in two worlds, but more often it's as if each world challenged and sanctified the other. I can dimly see something coming into existence, at the periphery of the eye." (Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 59. She then describes looking at children's drawings in a Holocaust Museum. "Among them, people are silent, but alert as if listening, because it is as if the children are speaking. I knew they were speaking and it seemed to me that everyone around me knew and we felt that if we just listened hard enough, we could make out the words. That's how it is when I hear God speaking, when I see what could be or even what is, but too dimly to make it out. I can almost hear, I can almost see. I can almost touch the peace proclaimed. Sometimes I think that faith is only about increasing our peripheral vision, peripheral hearing." (Gallagher, 59-60)

Brian Wren captures this well in the hymn that we are about to sing. And what you notice in his words as you sing them, is that this glorious vision of what God is going to fulfill takes place in ordinary simple acts of love and care in the midst of this world, in the course of our ordinary lives. So "lose your shyness, find your tongue, tell the world what God has done: God in Christ has come to stay. Live tomorrow's life today." (Brian Wren, "There's a Spirit in the Air," (Lauds))