

Apocalyptic images catch the reader's eye in our scripture from the Gospel of Mark today. Jesus uses them as images of change, images about the nature of things, the nature of our lives, but not as signals that the end is approaching. This reading also concludes the study of Mark in the Revised Common Lectionary.

People have been thinking about the end of time for a long time.
Predictions about the end of time – and how it all will end – are a kind of literature.

This literature emerges from cultures that have lived in fear too long –
from people who are angry – from people who want retribution.

Writers imagine God coming forth - to make things right –
to take down the bullies who have made life so hard - kind of a great big "gotcha."

In times of turmoil - it's comforting to imagine God –
as the great equalizer - coming forth and turning things around.

What do we call this kind of writing? We call it apocalyptic.

There was a lot of it from about 300 B.C. to about 70 A.D.

The two major apocalyptic writings in the Bible -
are Daniel – which was written in the earlier part of these years –
and Revelation – written in the latter part of these years –

Mark is not apocalyptic except for this short story which is often called "The Little Apocalypse."

People have been thinking about the end times for a long time.

And they have been predicting events for a long time.

The Mayan calendar ends in 2012.

People wonder if that could really mean something – be the end of things.

Hollywood will tell us all about it in a movie that should arrive soon.

The Mayan calendar has fascinated a lot of people throughout history.

It does not predict things as such as it is just a calendar.

But it's curious why the Mayan culture ended long before their calendar did.



People are always making predictions -
it seems a natural thing to do – as we think forward.

Some predictions are accurate and some are not. Some are prophetic.

Some are downright comical: I found a few to share with you.

"I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." Thomas Watson, Chairman of IBM, 1943.

"We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out."
Decca Recording Company rejecting the Beatles in 1962

"With over 50 foreign cars already on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn't likely to carve out a big slice of the US market." *Business Week*, August 2, 1968

"I see no good reasons why the views given in this volume should shock the religious sensibilities of anyone." Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 1869

"It will be years – not in my time – before a woman will become Prime Minister."
Margaret Thatcher, 1974



Well, let's get back to Mark.

One of the disciples points out the massive buildings.

And Jesus talks of tumbling stones.

Jesus says that -

someday those buildings - which the disciples think are so grand – will be gone.

And – before that century was out – the temple did fall – and Rome did begin its decline.

But the writer of Mark does not have Jesus telling us about a violent end to the world.

He says there will be wars and rumors of wars.

There will be earthquakes. There will be famines. There will be people claiming to know everything.

These are all part of the birth pains – the process – and its not all bad.



I am drawn to look at these statements metaphorically.

Pain can be a part of transformation.

Pain – or at least struggle - is often a part of learning.

We know that don't we? We know that in our own lives.

On a personal level –

we might think of it as a metaphor for the walls we construct in our own lives.

If we think about it psychologically - things we wall out – and things we wall in.¹

You decide to let something or someone be a part of your life.

Think of when this fits for you.

Sometimes new life tiptoes in.

We look back and can't remember when the years flew by.

On the other hand – interruptions of all kinds can happen.

Think of the times you had to adjust to the passing of the old and the coming of the new.

Maybe you have a plan for your life – and something happens – things tumble.

Or time and nature take their course – and things have to change.

Parents or spouses pass away or children leave home to create their own.

Body parts wear out – and we need to repair rotator cuffs – or spines -
or get new knees – and there is pain to that – but its constructive pain.

Such things can be terrible and wonderful.

And we give thanks for the opportunity to have them - usually.

Sometimes what happens will feel like earthquakes – or a famines -
the economy - the job market.

The bottom falls out of our life.

It is a good thing we can usually pick up the stones and build again.

At every moment and in each of us – life itself is emerging.

Something is always looking us in the eye – beckoning us forward.

A wish to learn a new skill – an urge to try a new sport –
or the curiosity to go somewhere you have never been – and widen your world



But – what if – for a few moments - we did imagine that things were coming to an end?

Earlier this week we watched a movie – a remake of a film from 1951 -

“The Day the Earth Stood Still.”

Everyone had to face the end of the world - as they had known it.

What if we knew we all had just a few months before it was all over?

What would you do?

Would you go somewhere you had always wanted to go?

Would you reconcile a fractured friendship? Who?

Would you reconnect with members of your family? Who?

Would you do that generous thing you always wanted to do for someone else? What is it?

If we answer “yes” to one or more of these possibilities -

I think it would mean that in our last days
we might be better stewards of all the things we have in this life.

But does our best stewardship of life have to exist
only in our imaginings of “what ifs” - the “what ifs” about when it will all be over?
That’s a good question – and something to take with you today.

Is that one reason we think about the end times – from time to time?
It prompts us to think about what we want to do in our lives.



The other thing I would like you to take with you is about Mark.
This story is the last we will have of Mark’s gospel for a long time.
As Advent begins and the lectionary shifts – we delve into Luke and hear those stories.

Mark has been our storyteller this year.²
Mark is the first gospel writer to tell the stories of Jesus -
stories that have been told for generations
because they touch a deep spiritual place in our lives.

We have not read all of them by any stretch – but we have read several.
And – it is time to let Mark go and move on. Life does that.

For some reason I'm having a little trouble letting go of Mark.

I may talk about Mark next week -
at our joint service at Christ Episcopal Church next Sunday at 10 a.m.

Why? Because it is a journey story – a hero's journey

Mark emphasizes the act of seeing.

Mark wants us to see more clearly.

For Mark - to see is to be aware – perceptive - insightful.

Mark wants us to see beneath surfaces and beyond the moment -
to the implications – consequences – and possibilities of our words and our actions.

Think of the story of the widow and her few coins we read last week.

I am not quite ready to leave Mark.

But time goes on and things are always moving.

Jesus was talking about that same thing too - that day on the Mount of Olives.

He said, "You will hear of wars and earthquakes and famines –
but it doesn't mean the end is near.

You will hear of the comings and goings of institutions and cultures –
but it doesn't mean the end is near.

It may only be the beginning of what God has planned.³



That is what I am really getting to –
and this is the other thing I want you to take from today.

If God is a planner and a story teller -
what might be happening next in your story?

Can we live into our new stories
with a keen eye to what is real - and what is enduring?

Can we live into the stories of our lives – even in the tumbling of some of our walls -
through the earthquakes and the famines -

A Matter of Time – based on Mark 13:1-8
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while at the same time welcoming the new –
letting some surprises take our breath away?
And – so we bid goodbye to this storyteller – this gospel writer
his words of wisdom – his call for us to see -
and his call for us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus
as we make our own way.

I think what helps us do it well –
is grounding ourselves in our history and the stories that have been important.

Consider their ancient wisdom.

I guess the other part is to live the kind of lives -
that came to our minds when we thought it might end soon.

¹ Adapted from John Meunier's blog on Mark 13:1-6

² Adapted from Mitzi Minor in *The Power of Mark's Story*

³ Adapted from an article that appeared in *The Christian Century* in 2003 by Mary W. Anderson entitled "Times Up."