

The World is (Always) Ending  
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington  
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March 17, 2024

SCRIPTURE READING Mark 13: 1-8, 24-37

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' <sup>2</sup>Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

<sup>3</sup> When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup>'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' <sup>5</sup>Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup>Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. <sup>7</sup>When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>24</sup> 'But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light,

<sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

<sup>26</sup>Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

<sup>28</sup> 'From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

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The world is ending.

The world is *always* ending.

The diagnosis.

*the stars will be falling from heaven,*

The divorce.

*kingdom against kingdom*

The bankruptcy.

She's been deployed.

*wars and rumours of wars*

She was my moon and stars, and she is gone

*The moon will not give its light....*

My grades!

Their crush said no.

When the bombs hit Pearl Harbor.

When the Twin Towers fell.

*stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down*

When the earthquake struck Haiti.

*there will be earthquakes in various places*

The forest fires.

Four years ago this week when we went into lockdown.

When Russia invaded Ukraine.

AI.

October 7.

*the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

It seems like the world is always ending.

Mark's gospel was written when the world was ending. Mark was writing in the middle of a war - the Jewish-Roman war of 66 to 74 of the Common Era. In the year 70, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and much of Jerusalem - and massacred thousands of Jews. It was the end of the world for the Jewish community - but not the first end of the world. They'd been enslaved and exiled and the First Temple destroyed. And it wasn't the last end of the world, either.

Mark's gospel was written when the world was ending in another way. Early Christians, who followed the way of Jesus, saw the end of the world on the cross. When Jesus rose, their world was reborn - but then he disappeared.

Mark's gospel was written for people whose world ended.

Which leads us to this question:  
What do we do when the world is ending?

Because, here's the thing, the world is always ending, in one way or the other.

There are signs and portents all over the place.

Some folks take these verses, and the ones in Daniel and the ones in Revelation, literally. And these folks look for the day and the hour of the end of the temporal universe.

Here's the interesting thing: the book of Daniel, the Revelation of John, Mark 13 - these texts are not just descriptions of apocalypse - not just stories of hot mess times - they are supposed to be sources of hope, sources of good news, for people living through the end of the world.

We look to Jesus, who lived through the end of the world and rose again to live and give us life.

And we turn to this wild and strange Little Apocalypse to see what Jesus will tell us.

Jesus tells us even he does not know the day or the hour when all these things will take place. So, there's no reason to read the tea leaves.

But we can be prepared. We can live every day the way Jesus calls us to live, the way we would want God to see us living, which is to say, by loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

To keep alert, to stay awake -

In Bible Study, we noticed a footnote in many Bibles in verse 33. There's an additional verb in many ancient manuscripts, "*Beware, keep alert and pray...*" Prayer (I think) can help us when it feels like the world is ending. Prayer can be calling out to God - and prayer can be breathing in God's love when the world is filled with hate. And prayer can be grounding ourselves when we feel like we have been flung out to the cliff's edge. And prayer can help us calm down from hyper-vigilance. So, Bible Study said, keep alert and pray.

As our Bible study folks said this week, Jesus encourages us to hold on. Hold on.

This week I listened again to the wisdom of Rev. Jacqui Lewis, pastor of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. In 2020, that church had a catastrophic fire. Not one stone on top of the other. And it wasn't like 2020 was an easy year in the first place. It's from Dr. Lewis that I learned the phrase, "we are living in hot-mess times."

And when she offers “God Talk for Hot-Mess Times” she starts by singing the spiritual, “Hold On Just a Little While Longer....”<sup>1</sup>

Hold on...we don't yet know the end of the story. Hold on.

And when there are earthquakes and the sun seems to go dark, this is when we need community the most. Find the people who are kind. Look for goodness. Let someone light the candle for you, when you can't do it on your own.

And we can remember that it's happened before. Every time it's the end of the world, it's raw and terrible and we cannot imagine the other side. I've had that feeling a dozen times in my life: this is it, the end of the world, I can't get through it. A dozen times so far. And every time, I call on the wisdom of those who have come before me. So maybe we can call on those who have come before us, who survived the end of the world, and survived it again.

After the second Temple was destroyed, Judaism was itself transformed into something new, rabbinic Judaism. Its development did not forget the catastrophe. But new wisdom emerged.

Rabbi Tarfon, who taught in the years after the destruction of the 2nd Temple, is quoted in the Mishnah - “remind[ing] us not to give up, especially when the task is daunting:

‘The work is plentiful...It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.’ (*Pirkei Avot* 2:15-16)<sup>2</sup>

As Christians we remember also what Jesus taught, moments before this morning's text:

That the greatest commandments are to love God and love our neighbor. Those commandments carry through the end of the world.

Let me close on this St. Patrick's Day with the wisdom of an Irish poet, John O'Donohue:

“Endings are natural. Often what alarms us as an ending can in fact be the opening of a new journey...a new beginning that we could never have anticipated; one that engages forgotten parts of the heart...The nature of calendar time is linear; it is made up of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theoed.com/jacquilewis>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/spirituality/3-jewish-reminders-when-world-seems-overwhelming>

durations that begin and end. The Celtic imagination always sensed that beneath time there was eternal depth. This offers us a completely different way of relating to time. It relieves time of the finality of ending. While something may come to an ending on the surface of time, its presence, meaning, and effect continue to be held into the eternal. This is how spirit unfolds and deepens.”<sup>3</sup>

The world is always ending.

And perhaps, perhaps, perhaps,

Perhaps the world is always starting again.

Amen.

a blessing for when you don't know how to pray - Kate Bowler

Teach us how to pray, God,

when our faith doesn't feel like comfort.

when there are not easy answers or tidy scripts.

when there are no other words but lament.

Teach us how to pray, God,

when we see Christ in Gethsemane

at the center of it all.

Teach us how to pray, God,

when the Spirit groans alongside us,

speechless too, at the pain, at the inexplicable, at the unfair.

Joining the chorus of others in this agonized prayer.

Teach us how to pray, God,

May our words of lament turn toward acts of love,

as we remake this beautiful, terrible world, together.

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<sup>3</sup> To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings.