


lec 33B-November 17, 2024

Daniel 12:1-3, Psalm 16, Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13:1-8

St. Paul Newark-Barbara Melosh

hese last days of the church year bring us face to face with endings, keeping time with the dwindling light here in the northern hemisphere, as the days grow shorter and the darkness increases. On All Saints Sunday, we call out the names of those we have loved and lost since this time last year. We are brought face to face with our own mortality—the reality that our days are numbered; and we do not know the number of our days. And throughout these Sundays in November, our readings bring us strange and disturbing visions of the end of the world—a season that is sometimes called “the little apocalypse.”

Visions of end time—the apocalypse—are found in many parts of the bible, including our first reading today, which is the end of a long dramatic battle—avenging armies clashing from every direction of the compass, the world swept into consuming violence, and then, in the part we hear today, prediction of the final victory. This is the first mention in the Bible of resurrection—as Daniel prophesies the triumph of the great prince Michael, the deliverance of the people, and the raising of the dead.

End time seems to hold a fascination for every age, including our own. Maybe you remember the spectacular special effects of those three films that brought Tolkien’s epic *Lord of the Rings* to the big screen. I vividly remember the grand finale of the last of them, “Return of the King,” with its masses of soldiers, horses and riders in a long sequence of a chaotic battle, and then the scene of thousands rising through the mist, first as ghostly specters and then becoming solid, embodied—the resurrection of the dead, as prophesied in the bible, with the return of Christ the king.

Years ago, a wildly popular series of books, the “Left Behind” series, portrayed the “rapture”, the imagined moment when the righteous will be swept up and the rest left behind to a world of destruction and chaos. And this fascination has not faded. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fantasy has its own category on Netflix, with recent titles including *Army of the Dead*, *Leave the World Behind*, and another billed as comedy-horror, *Zom 10: Bucket List of the Dead*.

Apocalypse looms large in our political lives and imagination. On a global scale, scientists and activists warn of the dire consequences of climate change, in words that echo the apocalyptic language of our readings today—flooding, drought, wildfires, tornadoes, mass extinction and more. Before the election, millions of Americans—more than 70 percent, by some estimates—feared catastrophic consequences if their candidate was not elected. Both candidates claimed the same. Donald Trump averred that if Harris won, “We won’t have a country any more.” Kamala Harris warned that Trump posed an existential threat to democracy.

In today’s story from Mark, set two thousand years ago, Jesus startles the disciples with his own predictions of destruction. These country boys are awe-struck by the scale and majesty of the Jerusalem temple. They marvel, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” If anything, that was an understatement. The foundation stones of its wall were forty feet long. An ancient historian reported that so much gold and silver covered the facade that in full sun the sight of it nearly blinded the viewer. It could be seen from miles away by approaching pilgrims. This architectural wonder was a monument to the survival and perseverance of the Jewish people. It was rebuilt after the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem, five hundred years earlier, followed by the long bitter exile of the Jews in Babylon.

And now, Jesus is telling them it’s all going to be destroyed—a prediction that came to pass about the time that the gospel of Mark was written.

While they are still reeling from Jesus’ prediction, he tells them that more than the temple will be destroyed. There will be wars, earthquakes, and famines—the destruction of the whole social and natural world. Jesus counsels, “Do not be alarmed!” (What???) This destruction and suffering is not the end, but instead, a beginning—the birth pangs of a new world to come.

Many first-century Christians believed that this new world was about to come to birth. After all, Jesus himself had told his disciples that they would not taste death before he came back.

The apostle Paul struggled with some first-century Christians who were convinced that Jesus was going to return very soon. That confidence has its downside. If you think this world is coming to an end, you don't take care of it. Why bother? And if you think Jesus is coming again to bring in a world of justice and mercy, why care for the poor and hungry in your midst now? Their suffering is temporary; Jesus will take care of it all.

What would you do if you believed the world was going to end tomorrow?

Martin Luther was asked that question, or so the story goes...and maybe you know what he is said to have answered:

"If I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree."

What does that mean? It doesn't even really make sense, does it? On the last day of the world, why take the trouble to dig a hole, set in a sapling, tamp in the dirt around it, water it? Why act on behalf of a future that might not even exist?

I imagine Luther, setting his shovel point into the ground and stepping down hard to drive it in deeper, the sweat gathering on his forehead as the hole gets wider and deeper, then planting a slender sapling with a few new leaves. Maybe then he'd sit down to a tankard of Katie's beer, taking a moment to enjoy the satisfaction of work well done—work done in faith that God will finish what we have begun. Each day lived with the faith that whatever we imagine, whatever we hope, whatever we fear, God holds the future.

And so, as faithful people have done for centuries and you continue to do today, we plan for a future we cannot know. In hope and trust, you set aside money for your children to go to trade school or college, sometimes before they are even born. You give to this congregation, not knowing if St. Paul will be here for your great grandchildren or even for the rest of your life. You make quilts for Lutheran World Relief, so that people you will never meet in places you will never see might be sheltered and warmed. You support ELCA World Hunger and LWR global mission so communities far from here can build wells and plant trees and grow food—the life God intends, where there is enough for all.

Our human imagination reaches for a vision of a future we cannot know. But we're called to the life right in front of us. We are called to do the work we're given to do. To love the people we're given to love. To hold fast to hope and provoke one another to love and good deeds, so that all might take hold of the life that really is life.

Thanks be to God.