

FIRST LESSON: Daniel 12: 1-10
SECOND LESSON: Mark 13:1-8
November 14, 2021

“Holy Cynicism”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Although only related to me by marriage I’m fond of quoting that old curmudgeonly cynic Mark Twain. Twain said, “When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Kentucky. They’re always 20 years behind everything.”

Of course, if we want input that is a little more contemporary it’s hard to go wrong with the popular scientist Neil Degrasse Tyson who said, “In 5-billion years the Sun will expand and engulf our orbit as the charred ember that was once Earth vaporizes. Have a nice day.”

Our New Testament reading today is often called “The Little Apocalypse,” but it begins with the disciples admiring the Temple. These were country people, unused to such impressive buildings, and the Temple was an impressive structure. Technically it wasn’t even finished being built at the time of Jesus. Herod began construction in 20 BCE and finishing touches were still being added when the disciples were there with Jesus. The stones were absolutely massive. Compared to everything around it this was an enormous building, fifteen stories high by our reckoning. The white marble was adorned with gold on the outside so the building glowed. Inside was gold, silver, crimson and purple and polished cedar wood. There were huge columns. To say it was impressive is an understatement. It looked like it would last forever.

The Temple was finished in the year 66, and destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. The siege of Jerusalem and slaughter of its inhabitants was horrendous. The Temple itself was destroyed by fire. It seems an impossible thing that stone should be destroyed by fire, but the Roman soldiers built a giant bonfire around the Temple and the intense heat caused the moisture in the limestone to expand, which in turn made the stones explode. The Temple was reduced to rubble. That which looked invincible was gone.

Jesus knew that this would happen, and he urged his followers not to put their trust in temporal things. They wanted to know when these things would happen, connecting the destruction of the Temple with the Second Coming and the end of the world. But things are never that simple, and apocalyptic writing is always as ambiguous as it is terrifying. In the apocalyptic Book of Daniel, Daniel saw and heard the answer to the question of when will the final judgement come as, “It will be for a time, times and half a time,” to which he pretty much responded, “What?” But God said, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be

wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.”

Both of our scripture passages this morning are about the end times, easily my least favorite subject. Every generation has its doomsday prophets. And every generation has people who point to contemporary catastrophes and identify them as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. And year after year, age after age, it does not happen. In 1818, a man from Massachusetts named William Miller calculated the date of the end of world using a combination of a literal reading of the bible and apocalyptic numerology. He determined the date to be October 22, 1844 and he convinced thousands to follow him. Many sold or destroyed all their property, convinced they would not need it anymore. They waited on hillsides in white robes they had made themselves. Christ did not return. The people were devastated. Those who stayed faithful and reworked their understanding of Miller’s prophecy are now the Seventh Day Adventists. The Jehovah’s Witnesses got their start as an end times cult as well. When Jesus did not physically return in 1914, they quickly came up with the answer that he secretly did. And Howard Camping did the same thing in 2011. Just like William Miller he used literalism and numerology and claimed that judgement day would be May 21, 2011. Once more thousands were deceived and once more thousands suffered unnecessary financial hardship and emotional trauma.

We all imagine ourselves to be wiser, smarter, and above all ridiculous cult like ideas, but human nature is gullible. I don’t know what the draw is to extremist and strange doctrines, but Christians should know better. Scripture warns us very clearly. Jesus said, “Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many.” But scripture tells us that when Jesus does return it will not be possible to mistake him for someone else. The Second Coming will not be a matter of opinion. According to the Gospel of Matthew there will be no ambiguity whatsoever. Jesus said, “So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” (Matthew 24:26-27) Whether it is lack of biblical knowledge or emotional need, however, there are always some who fall into cult like thinking. And when there is added social stress—like the pandemic—it tends to get worse.

I used to be a lot more patient with doomsday prophets. But the more insistent people are that the sky is falling the more suspicious I get. If we take the historical long view we have been in tough times before. The Civil War nearly destroyed us. The failure of reconstruction caused endless suffering for those of African descent in this country. The early 20th century saw the First World War. The 1920s didn’t just have flappers, it had gangsters and eugenics, finishing off with the Great Depression. The 1930s and 40s saw the rise of Nazi sympathizers, anti-Semitism and the worsening of Jim Crow. And then there was World War II. And the Holocaust. The 1950s had McCarthyism, racism and every other kind of ism. The 1960s the Vietnam War and protests on the streets. The 70s brought more protests and Watergate. In the 1980s AIDS emerged. Do I need to continue?

Yes, things are tough right now. Is the world about to end? I really don't think so. We're in the midst of a pandemic, and people are very tense and politically divided. The world of nations is struggling with the issue of climate change and trying to address the problem without massive economic fallout. We appear to argue about everything right now, and things that shouldn't be divisive at all have become divisive. But we have been here before, and we survived. Jesus warned us that bad things will happen. We don't need to look for secret meanings behind every world event. We don't need to live in fear. And **very importantly**, we should not give up on trying to make this world a better place because the next world is coming.

Each tragedy, each hardship, each stressful period of time provides an opportunity for God's grace. When disasters come that is the time Christians should band together to help. We can set aside our theological differences and ideological conflicts in order to get the job done. It is not necessary that we argue about everything. It is not necessary that someone be declared "right," because if we go that way in God's eyes we'll all be wrong. Hurricanes, floods, famine and war are a tragic part of our world. The battle against injustice will go on till the end. The apostle Paul tells us "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." (Galatians 6: 9-10)

They will know we are Christians by our love. Apocalyptic end of the world passages serve the same function a rumble strip on the highway does. They wake us up. They tell us to pay attention. They tell us to live as if we will be discussing what we did **today** with God **tomorrow**. Amen

Daniel 12: 1-10

12 "At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. ⁴ But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."

⁵ Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank. ⁶ One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?"

⁷ The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, "It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed."

⁸ I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, “My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?”

⁹ He replied, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the time of the end.¹⁰ Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.

Mark 13:1-8

¹ As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

² “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”

⁵ Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.