

## **Mark 13:1-8**

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 birthpangs."

# **The End of Everything** - November 14, 2021

*Mark 13:1-8*

When I started my ministerial vocation nearly thirty years ago, there was a lot of reason to be optimistic about the world. In 1994, we had recently witnessed an amazing thing: the fall of communism. Only a few years prior, the Berlin Wall had come down and regime after regime, including the Soviet Union itself, had ended one-party rule and were moving toward democratically elected governments. Freedom was returning. Churches in the former Eastern Block were reopening and millions were flocking in.

Moreover, in 1994, freedom came to South Africa with the end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela as President. Amazing! For a moment, it seemed that the values and ideas we as Americans had championed were actually winning! For a moment, it appeared that the sacrifices of our people and our military in various wars were truly justified as we remember Veterans Day. Maybe, just maybe, the world was going to prosper and grow in new ways and we would no longer have to worry about wars and nuclear devastation anymore.

As we gather in 2021, the outlook for the world is far less certain, isn't it? In Russia and other nations, the promise of freedom and democracy has slipped backwards. Authoritarian governments are in control in many nations that were once considered seedlings of democratic progress. While no one could replace Nelson Mandela in South Africa, his successors have been a rather mundane lot, succumbing to a lack of vision for their nation and finding that corruption often pays. Even in the United States, we are investigating what happened on January 6 of this year when our own supposedly solid democratic institutions were endangered from the inside possibly by the president himself. Government is fragile.

We live in a quasi-Covid world. Infections are still happening, while vaccines are available but some don't want them. A treatment may be close to getting approved. However, the rest of the world is not so fortunate. There are nations where fewer than five percent of the population have been immunized. There is some resentment from the world against the United States that we are giving boosters, third shots, when most of the world has had none. In the meantime, the "supply chain" of parts and services is slowing the economy and creating shortages. Our physical and economic health is fragile.

Climate change is a fact of life. You may have heard about the famines in Madagascar and Central America, almost certainly attributable to climate change. Even if you don't believe climate change is real, there are nevertheless millions of people unable to grow food to support themselves and they are running away in droves to find a better place to live. Climate change has been identified as the greatest threat to the world's security in this century as huge shifts in population are and will take place. Our ecology is fragile.

On Tuesday, many of us who use the internet were inconvenienced by having our networks down for several hours. Apparently something similar happened in San Francisco the day before. Coincidence? Technical glitch? Deliberate action by our adversaries? If so, no one's saying anything. At my school, teachers were scrambling to revise lesson plans because so much of what they do involves the internet. Students working from home because of Covid quarantine couldn't go online. Our technology is fragile.

The nation seems divided more than it has in decades. There seems to be only right and left and no middle. During the recent election cycle, we were subjected to endless advertisements from candidates not telling us how good they are but mostly shouting how bad their opponent is. The news media seems designed to encourage hatred and mistrust. Our community is fragile.

In short, 2021 is a far cry from 1994. It is far easier to believe that we are living in the end times now than it was just thirty years ago. Parents may well question and fear for their children's futures. What kind of world are we leaving to them? The goal of every generation is to bequeath a world in better shape than the one we entered. And before we say all is gloom and doom, we should acknowledge that some things are better but more may be worse. What we can say without much fear of contradiction is that Earth in 2021 is facing the proverbial "Severe Storm Watch." Things are happening all around us and we have no idea whether or how much we ourselves will be affected by all these events. Yet, we also know that storms are very much a necessary part of weather systems and storms are usually beneficial, bringing us rain.

As Jesus gathered with his disciples outside the temple, he was seeing storms on the world's horizon. Obviously, he knew that he was going to die very soon. Nonetheless, his disciples remained oblivious to what was about to happen to their master and friend. Instead, the disciples, out-of-towners who had spent little time in Jerusalem, were caught up in the huge buildings and the hustle and bustle of the city. You know, the way we might have felt on our first visit to Washington or New York. "What large stones and what large buildings!" Oohs and Aahs indeed! For the disciples, no storms were in sight. No storms were even crossing their imaginations. They truly had no idea that their worlds were about to be turned upside down with the crucifixion of Jesus. Be oblivious, disciples, be oblivious.

But Jesus knew the future: the short term and the long term. And really, it wasn't that hard to foresee. Jesus knew that his ministry and preaching had been enraging the religious establishment for some time. He knew that now that he was present in Jerusalem, his words and miracles would upset the Scribes and Pharisees even more. He knew his arrest, trial, and crucifixion was coming soon and he could only pray that God would be with his followers. Soon it would be up to his followers to spread the good news to the world. Would they be up to the task?

Jesus could also see past his own future to the future of the Temple and his beloved Jerusalem. And really, Jesus' predictions of the destruction of the Temple and the City should not have surprised anyone, especially his own disciples.

For centuries, the Jews of Jerusalem and the Romans who occupied their city had been on a collision course. The Jews were sick of being dominated, just like the millions all over Europe and the Near East were sick of the Roman Empire. The Jews, of course, had even more reason to be angry. They knew they were God's chosen people. They knew that had the God of heaven and earth on their side. They had been fueled by priests, and prophets, and so-called Messiahs convinced that their day of deliverance was at hand. Finally, the Jews would again be in charge of their own land and their own fate. Finally, the true God would reign. Finally, the hated Romans would go away forever. Finally, they would live as had been predicted hundreds of years ago.

Unfortunately, the Jews were badly and sadly mistaken. Far from the grand restoration they craved, Jerusalem was destined to destruction. It had to be.

Just as some of us in our own time refuse to face facts about Covid, Climate Change, Technology, Democracy, Community, and so many other things going on in the world, many Jews could not really understand and appreciate the sheer power of the Roman Empire. Swaddled in their delusions that God would not allow Jerusalem and the Temple to be destroyed a second time, they were convinced that the Messiah would come and drive the Romans from their power. Many in the crowds felt Jesus might be their liberator. When Jesus declined to summon an army, the crowds joined forces with the religious establishment and agreed that Jesus needed to die. So much for Messiahs who don't act the way the crowds wanted them to!

But it should have been obvious to anyone that the Romans would not put up with the Jews and their independence movement forever. After all the existence of the Empire depended on keeping all people convinced that rebellion would always end in destruction. If Rome permitted the Jews to have their freedom, then what would stop the others from revolting?

Impossible! So in 66AD, thirty years after Jesus, the Romans ended the Jewish dream of an independent Israel once and for all. They destroyed the Temple. They destroyed the city. They forced the Jews to scatter all over the Roman Empire where they hoped their religion would die. So yes, Jesus' prophecy that, "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down," came true.

However, what is equally true is what did not happen. The Jews did not get their wish of an independent country, freed from Rome. However, the Romans did not get their wish of eradicating the Jews or Judaism. Notice, friends, the Jews are still with us. Indeed, there is today, 2000 years after Jesus, an independent nation called Israel with Jerusalem as its capital and Hebrew is the official language. There is, of course, no Roman Empire.

It was natural enough, in the wake of Jesus' surprising prophecy about Jerusalem, that the disciples wanted to know more. Jesus predicted the end of the Temple and their city. Of course they wanted to know!

We live in unsettled time ourselves and there are so many events surrounding us which could end our world in the very near future. Will climate change overwhelm us? Will the anti-democratic forces so prevalent in our politics today prevail and bring in a new authoritarian regime to snuff out freedom? Will Covid mutate into something science can't defeat? Will our technology become so sophisticated that it will control us and we can't control it? Will mutual mistrust break down the remaining bonds of community to the point that none of us can believe in each other's goodness anymore?

Friends, all of these threats to our world are every bit as real as the threat of Rome was to Israel. Any of these or a combination of these could make our world unrecognizable and bring it to an end.

The end of the world. An interesting proposition. What does the end of the world mean?

In popular imagination, some predict the physical destruction of the Earth. Others predict a separation of the good from the evil in one sudden rapture. Others see the humanity trapped in endless wars, earthquakes, and famines that make whatever we are seeing now look like a gentle summer rain.

But rather than listen to human prophets of the end of the world, and every year there are new ones, let us remember not human prophecies, but Jesus' words. Jesus' words, not those of human self-proclaimed prophets, are the only reliable truth we have. Perhaps we should pay attention.

First, while Jesus does predict an end time, he does not seem very focussed on it. The truth is the world is always experiencing end times, both small and large. Indeed, the ending for one person may be the beginning for another. The end of the Civil War ended the world of White Southerners. However, it also marked a beginning for freed Black slaves. The end of the Jerusalem Temple also meant a new beginning for Jews and Judaism as they literally fanned out all over the world, keeping their faith intact.

I can't tell you how all the possible things that could go wrong with the world in the coming years will ultimately play out. Really, all I can tell you is that the human prophets, according to Jesus, will certainly be wrong. What did Jesus say? "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." Prophets of all kinds are leading people astray right now in our country and all over the world. Jesus tells us to ignore them.

Is the world messed up? Yes. But then again, it has always been messed up, somewhere for someone. Chaos is normal. Jesus also said, "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."

I don't need to recite my list of things going wrong in the world again. You know it by heart, I'm sure. And there are no doubt things going wrong for you personally which threaten your personal worlds. Listen to Jesus. He is neither surprised or shocked by wars, earthquakes, famines, and everything else. They will take place, but these things are not about the end.

For Christians, the answer is clear: do not look for signs. Do not dwell on possibilities. Do not look for human beings to save us. There will always be signs and problems. There will always be potential threats. There will always be false messiahs who claim that only they can solve the problems.

In these troubled times, like all the troubled times that went before us and, yes, all the troubled times that will come after us, there is only one solution. There is only one place to go. There is only one source for truth and only one person to trust.

And that, of course, is Jesus. Listen to him and him alone. Obey his teachings. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Share this good news with everyone you meet. Do these things and you will be free, free from the rumors, free from the fear, free from the false leaders, and most importantly, free to know that God is in charge! And that, my friends, that should be more than enough to satisfy us.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.