



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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The End Is Coming and That Is the Good News

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 18, 2012

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Mark 13:1-8

Repent for the end is coming! I can't actually imagine shouting such words in Times Square or anywhere else. I mean, what vestments would you wear while doing so? And yet in my heart, I believe them to be true: the end really is coming—not because we have hurricanes in November or hurricanes at all, not because Israel's and Gaza's latest violent involvement may be the kindling an already war-hot area needs to explode into something really big, not because one candidate won and another didn't. The end is coming because it always does. And yes, wonderfully progressive and opened minded, Christians, hear this: we need to be ready.

Lest you conclude that I have finally gone round the bend, let me tell you what I mean and more specifically let me tell you how I read gospel lessons such as this one we just heard. It helps to know what Mark's world was like. In a word it was a world of terror. And though it became much worse during the time of and just before the writing of this narrative, unrest had been the context of life for these first-century people of God for several generations. In fact, the land we know as the Holy Land had been occupied for four centuries, beginning with the Greeks in 300 BCE; but in the two hundred years leading up to the setting for today's lesson, circumstances had become more and more serious. In 167 BCE Antiochus Epiphanes IV desecrated the Temple. That event and the rededication of the Temple that followed are the basis of the story of Hanukkah. The Temple was further desecrated in 63 BCE at the hand of the Roman general Pompey. Its eventual destruction by order of Titus in 70, though traumatic, was, as you see, the culmination of strife that had been present for many years, many long years of occupation.

This was the world in which Mark was writing. The Temple was the center of life for God's people, certainly for Jews who were remaining true to Judaism, but also for these early followers of Jesus, who were just beginning to think of themselves as Christians, as something other than Jews. It is difficult for us to imagine something that signifies for us in precisely the same way. Regardless, what we do know is that, just as we are, the people of this time were desperate to achieve some sort of understanding of the world around them. The genre of writing and thinking we know as apocalyptic was tailor-made for this kind of setting. Long in search of a paradigm that showed them a way out of their circumstances, the apocalypse, though temporarily traumatic, would offer ultimate relief, re-ordering, and the bringing of all things new. Some destruction along the way was just the price to be paid. Little wonder the Jesus of Mark's community was remembered to have said, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. 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 birth pangs."

How these words must have resonated in the lives of those who heard and read Mark's words. The historian Josephus adds some light on Mark's rather cryptic reference to false messiahs, writing of a number of charismatic leaders in the first century who were primarily concerned with liberation, not anything quite as grand as Jesus' mission came to be understood, but highly appealing and persuasive among a people who had been occupied and downtrodden too long. So you see the world really did feel like it was coming to an end.

All interesting, yes? But what on earth does it have to do with any of us? Well, in many ways not very much. In fact, my argument is that the incorporation of this message, the message of the apocalypse, as one of the principle messages of the Christian faith has caused infinitely more trouble than good. In profound ways it has created within us—Christians, that is—a religion that is rooted less in the now than in the future. Beyond a doubt, in a wide swath of Christianity, it has led to a near obsession with this proposed event, which we rather beautifully and innocently call the Second Coming. And even in

less literal communions like our own, the orthodox position is still that we are on some sort of cataclysmic countdown to another Big Bang, one that will be a whole lot less creative than the last one, one that will finally restore us (and we know who *we* are) with God.

Watching the rockets' red glare over Gaza and Israel is pretty scary, and I will grant you that the Middle East may indeed be on the brink of some big change that could affect life as we know it. Additionally, global warming may be—many in this room would argue—a harbinger of change that will affect every detail of our lives. And maybe the financial cliff of which some speak may be the plunge of which the doomsayers have warned us. But here is my point: Our theological understanding of such possibilities is that God is not directly causing or using these potential disasters as a way to bring God's realm on earth. But that is precisely how the people in Mark's community understood the big events—catastrophic events—of their time. They were looking for deliverance in the form of the coming of God's realm literally on earth, a realm at which they coincidentally happened to be the center.

Do we really have to believe that we are headed for some 21st or 22nd or 30th century version of that? I don't think so, and I think that our getting honest about what we really believe is utterly critical to the thriving of our faith in a modern world. As a Christian, I want to be one who is mocked for the generosity and wideness of my love, not for an archaic view of the world that hinders more than it helps.

So why then, you may wonder, did I begin by warning you that the end is coming? Because it is, and it matters that it is. I am talking about the end coming in a much more widespread and finally much more important way. This moment we are currently living will end. In fact, there it went; that moment is over now. We have lost it, and we have lost it forever. And when we live like these moments are reproducible, we are living like fools. Jesus said, "The realm of God is here; it is now; it is within." If these are kingdom moments, we need to be looking at them more than a bit differently.

On Friday I saw the new Denzel Washington film, *Flight*. I don't think that it is a spoiler to say that it is a terrific story of redemption, very costly redemption. A man had been living in a way our culture would say was "living like there was no tomorrow," with lots of booze, sex and drugs! But in fact he was living as though he had all the time in the world, a world of tomorrows; and in the process he not only lost so many todays, he almost lost his future as well. It is an account of a man's personal apocalypse and his descent into hell AND of his return from it. If you can sit through the crash scene, which is actually a metaphor for the crash of Whip, Mr. Washington's character, if you can sit through it without losing consciousness, it is a film not to be missed.

You get my point. The message of our faith, my beloved friends, is not that we must try with all our hearts to fit some archaic view of the universe into our modern consciousness, but that we are invited to an intense encounter with the Christ of our faith in a way that changes our lives. We need to live every moment as though it were our last. Every Hallmark card in America urges us to do it, but frankly to me, it sounds somewhat exhausting. And it is, I think. And we know it is part of the reason we anesthetize our selves and dull our senses with all sorts of potions and distractions—because the present is so overwhelming powerful. But to miss it *is* to miss it; we never get it back.

Every moment we live is an apocalyptic moment, and we are called to live each one with the simple intensity that presence brings. The warning in these passages is not about the loss of eternity, which resides in the hands of God, as do we, but about the loss of this eternal moment.

The kingdom of God has come near; shall we live it or shall we not?

In the name of God. *Amen.*

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