

Tracy Daub
12/3/17--University Presbyterian Church
Mark 13:24-37; Isaiah 64:1-9

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT:
ANTICIPATING THE COMING OF CHRIST

Harold Camping, a Christian radio entrepreneur, predicted that the world would come to an end on May 21, 2011. Through his careful study of scripture, Camping had arrived at what he was certain was the precise date of the apocalypse--the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment when faithful believers would ascend to heaven and nonbelievers would be destroyed in cataclysmic events of fires, earthquakes, and floods. Camping spent two years proclaiming his doomsday message, raising tens of millions of dollars from his listeners to pay for 5,000 billboards, books, and pamphlets translated into 75 languages. As the predicted date drew near, Camping and his forecast captured the attention of millions of people around the globe. No one knows for sure how many people were prompted by his message to hastily get married, quit their jobs, rack up credit card debts, throw lavish end of the world parties, or even, in some known cases, commit suicide. No one, no one was more stunned than Camping when on May 21, 2011 the world did *not* come to an end.

Those of us who pride ourselves on being rational Christians shake our heads in derision of people who would be taken in by doomsday predictors like Camping. We don't believe such prophetic pronouncements and we have little use for the notion of an apocalypse. But *then* we are awkwardly confronted with Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel. In this chapter we hear Jesus *himself* talk about the end of the world, about cataclysmic and cosmic disruptions, and about the Second Coming of the Son of Man. These words disturb and confuse us. How do we understand this unsettling pronouncement or the fact that Jesus is the one proclaiming the message?

Chapter 13 of Mark is referred to as Mark's "Little Apocalypse," to contrast it with the much longer apocalyptic writings found in the Book of Revelation. While it may be hard for us to imagine, Mark's Little Apocalypse was actually written by Mark to offer words of hope and encouragement to his early Christian community. That seems strange to us, for how could predictions about the end of the world be considered good news? Well, they would be if you were part of a community living in a situation of profound bad news. Mark wrote to a community that had endured great suffering. His Gospel was most likely written around the time of the Jewish uprising in 66-70 A.D. when a faction of the Jewish people rose up in revolt against their Roman oppressors. Rome, notorious for its brutality, then retaliated against the Jews with bloody ferocity--killing, torturing, and enslaving. And then perhaps the greatest loss occurred when the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was more than just a place of worship. It was considered God's dwelling on earth. It was the center of the Jewish life and faith and society.

Imagine if today the U.S. Capitol building were blown up. All that it represents, our democracy, our history as a nation, all this would feel under assault. Such a loss would no doubt represent the end of the world as we knew it. In a somewhat similar way, the destruction of the Temple devastated the Jewish people and marked the end of the world as *they* knew it. Mark had all this in his mind when he wrote his gospel. The apocalypse he described in Chapter 13 wasn't predicting a scary *future* event--it was describing the apocalypse the Jewish people were *already* experiencing. The apocalypse had already arrived in their lives. They were *already* devastated by cataclysmic events. Add to that the persecution that the early Jewish Christians experienced for their belief in Jesus from within their Jewish community, and you will begin to gain a picture of a frightened and beleaguered community who found some measure of comfort in hearing their

suffering described by Mark, who could find hope in hearing Jesus' words that their suffering was not ignored by God. There would come a time when Christ would come again and deliver them from their pain. And so the Second Coming was anticipated, hoped for by a people who desperately wanted God to come and right what was wrong in this world.

I wonder if Mark's Little Apocalypse might get us thinking about our own "little apocalypses": those circumstances that devastate our lives and bring about the end of the world as we have known it.

I can't stop thinking about that recent tragic story in our local news--about the Chautauqua County woman who was out walking her dogs when she was mistakenly killed by a hunter who thought she was a deer. The newspaper stories offered the basic facts: the hunter heard a scream after he fired the gun; he ran to the woman, applied pressure to the wound, and called 911. But it is what *wasn't* said in the newspaper stories that won't leave me alone. My mind fills in the gaps of what I imagine took place: the hunter's emotions at seeing the wounded woman, the frantic scene as he tried to stop the bleeding and call 911, and what I imagine must have been his desperate desire to turn back time and stop himself from pulling that trigger. In that fraction of a second, the world as he knew it, and that of his victim and her family, came to a tragic end.

When has the world as you knew it come to an end? When you were served divorce papers? When the doctor gave you the diagnosis? When your beloved died? Or maybe when your boss told you that you were being laid off, or when your parents kicked you out after finding out you were gay, or when you were injured in an accident. We all experience our own "little apocalypses," when our world collapses in fragments.

It is at such times when we are confronted with our own brokenness and pain that we want a very big God who can do very big things. That is the wish of the prophet Isaiah in our reading today who cries out to God, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" I am willing to bet that you have uttered a similar prayer in your life--when watching particularly upsetting stories on the evening news, or when sitting beside the bed of a dying loved one, or when confronted with injustice. I bet you too have prayed for God to tear open the heavens and come down. Maybe your prayer sounded something like this: O God, protect the children! Stop terrorism! End abuse! Save the elephants! End rape! Stop racism! Protect the polar ice caps! Stop greed! Eliminate hunger! Eradicate cancer! Save my loved one! These are the prayers of longing, yearning for God to come and make right what is wrong. And we direct these prayers to our really big God who can do really big things. In other words, we are offering our heartfelt prayers to an apocalyptic God--a God who can do big things.

But we must be careful that we do not assume to know what those big things will look like or when they will come. Jesus warns us here in chapter 13 not to try to guess when these end time events will take place. We just don't know when this Second Coming will occur or what form it will take. Despite what everyone *thinks* they know what the Second Coming will look like--they don't. Think about the really big thing God did in the first coming of Christ: a vulnerable little baby born in a backwater town to an unwed couple, who when he grew up was crucified like a common criminal. And so many people could not see it for the big thing it was. So Jesus tells us here in Mark to keep awake and stay alert and keep watch because we might not be prepared for God's coming. Maybe God could come and we wouldn't even know it. Keep alert, watch, Jesus tells us.

That is what we do in Advent: we watch and we wait for Christ's coming. We wait for the Christ who comes at the end of time and we wait for the Christ who comes into all of our personal endings, and we wait for the One who comes with healing love for all that is broken in us and around us. But waiting for Christ to come does not mean we just kick back in our recliners with a nice cool beer and wait it out. Jesus tells us *how* to wait here in Chapter 13. Jesus says, "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." Waiting means we are put in charge, each with our own work. We wait and watch for Christ to redeem our lives and our world by doing the work Jesus gave us to do.

There is a poster with a humorous slogan that speaks to this situation. It reads: "Jesus is coming: look busy." Of course, it's not just a matter of looking busy. We need to get busy with the work of God's kingdom: loving, serving, forgiving, exercising kindness, carrying out justice. A recent 60 Minutes program featured a group of doctors, many of them American volunteers, working to care for patients in Syrian hospitals that have bombs dropped on them by government fighter planes--bombs, crashing through hospital rooms, blowing up surgical rooms, landing on patients, killing the already injured. Approximately 800 medical professionals have been killed by these bomb attacks on hospitals. When the doctors were asked why they would stay and serve in what is basically an apocalyptic nightmare, they answered that they saw this as the work they had been given to do.

What is the work you have been given to do, even as you wait and watch for Christ to come into your personal pain and into our broken world? Where does God need you to forgive, to heal, to feed, to speak out, to hold a hand, to write a letter, to wash a body, to hold a baby, to stock a shelf, to march in protest? What I hear Jesus calling us to do, is to enter into other

people's apocalypses. That's what we are doing with our alternative gift giving this season to people who have experienced the apocalypse of natural disasters. And then there are the social apocalypses of poverty, racism, crime. And there are the personal apocalypses of people we know living with grief, loss, addiction, illness. The work Jesus has left for us to do, is the work of entering into the apocalypses around us. And if I understand Jesus correctly, he tells us here in Mark that it is only when we do this work, *his* work, that we will be able to see when he comes among us.

For decades now, churches in the United States have witnessed a slow-moving apocalypse of the Christian church as we knew it. We have lost members. We have lost social status. We have lost influence. Just as the people of Mark's world had placed all their trust in the Temple as the location of the Kingdom of God, we modern Christians grew up placing our trust in the institutional church as the locus of God's realm. But Jesus warns us here in Mark 13 not to confuse religious institutions with the Kingdom of God. The success or failure of religious institutions does not determine God's activity in the world. So as we Christians confront the end of the world as we have known it in our churches, maybe Jesus is also reminding us to refocus our attention away from anxiety around institutional survival and get on with the work God has given us to do: serving God's people in the midst of their apocalypses. Otherwise, distracted by whether we might die or not, we just might miss it when Christ arrives among us.

In Advent, we admit our longing for the coming of Christ--whether the first coming of Christ as the babe in the manger or the second coming at the end times. We admit that the world as we know it, and we as we know ourselves, need to come to an end. We need hate to end. We need cruelty to end. We need suffering to end. We need our own dark natures to end. And we

need Christ to bring about this change. The good news found in Mark's Apocalypse is that God comes into our lives. God enters our pain, our brokenness, our darkness to redeem us and to redeem our world.

The big apocalyptic book of the Bible--the Book of Revelation--ends with a three-word prayer: Come, Lord Jesus. And that prayer is really a good way to understand all apocalyptic writing--as a prayer for God to come to us. It's an appropriate prayer for us this Advent whenever we open the newspaper, or turn on the news, or wrestle with our own little apocalypses in our lives. We utter this apocalyptic prayer of hope: "Come, Lord Jesus."