***THE END TIMES***

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November 14, 2021

Text: Mark 13:1-13, 24-37

Over the course of the last several weeks, I have had several people ask, “*Are we in the end times?*” As best I can judge from our conversations, the *end times* to which they refer are not the end of the pandemic but the end of time, which is sometimes called the apocalypse. Perhaps it is not surprising that such a question might arise, given the current state of the world. As Union Presbyterian Seminary President Brian Blount writes:

*Driven by fears generated from two world wars, financial armageddons, threat of nuclear and now environmental and pandemic annihilation, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have taken on an apocalyptic bearing in a secular guise.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Those words were written in 2014 before COVID, but if anything, the angst has increased with the current pandemic, rising racial tensions and political divisions in our nation, the January 6 assault on the Capitol, and the proliferation of climate catastrophes. The chaos around us seems to echo some of those descriptions we hear in apocalyptic passages in the Bible, like the one we heard from Mark’s Gospel this morning:

*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.*

This 13th chapter of Mark’s Gospel is often referred to as “The Little Apocalypse”, which suggests of course that there is a big apocalypse out there, though one might think that any apocalypse – big or little – is more than enough!

Throughout Scripture there are apocalyptic writings, most prominently in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, this section of Mark, and Revelation, which is perhaps the truly big apocalypse. Apocalypse refers to an end and a beginning –

the end of the world as we know it

and the beginning of the new creation as God envisions it,

the final triumph of God and the return of Christ in glory,

a time when God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When will that be? Are we already in the end times or at least the beginning of the end times? “*About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*,” says Jesus. Apparently, not everyone has read this verse from the 13th chapter of Mark’s Gospel.

In the 1840s a Vermont Baptist named William Miller led a movement in the eastern United States that became known as the Millerites. Using data from Genesis and Daniel, Miller mathematically determined that the day of Christ’s return would fall in 1843 and so led a revival of great religious fervor in preparation for the Lord’s coming. The day came and went without incident, whereupon Rev. Miller announced that he had miscalculated and that the Day of the Lord would fall one year later. So for another year the Millerites prepared with equally great religious fervor, and the day came and went without the return of the Lord. Not surprisingly, Rev. Miller lost most of his followers. He thought that he had figured it out, but “*about that day and hour no one knows….*”

In the 1970s Hal Lindsay came out with a book entitled *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. He too had read the signs in Scripture that pointed to the Day of the Lord and had calculated that the day was fast approaching. His calculations likewise proved erroneous, and while his book sold hundreds of thousands of copies, Hal Lindsay turned out to know no more about the precise day of the Lord’s return than do you and I. For, “*about that day and hour no one knows…*.”

In 1999 some said that the end would come with the new millennium, that the passing of another thousand years from Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem would mark his return. They prepared for that day with food, water, prayers and all the defenses against Y2K that modern technology could muster. They failed to notice that technically 2000 years had already come and gone since Jesus’ birth in about 4 B.C.E. but undaunted they made their preparations. The Day of the Lord did not arrive on January 1, 2000 as they expected, nor on January 1, 2001 when the new millennium actually did begin. The millenialists thought they knew when the end times would begin, but they didn’t, for “*about that day and hour no one knows….*”

“*Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished*,” plead Jesus’ disciples as he warns them of the destruction of the temple. They voice what many of us would like to know – when will it happen? This is not just idle curiosity; it is both fervent faith that what Jesus is saying will come to pass and a faithful desire to be prepared when that day arrives, and a little notice would be helpful! Yet Jesus offers no firm date, just a description of the difficult days to come for his followers. For those who were hearing these words of Jesus as recorded by Mark, the destruction of the Temple was already history; it was destroyed in about 70 A.D., about the same time that Mark’s Gospel was written. So, by the time Mark’s audience heard these words of Jesus to his disciples, the destruction of the Temple and persecution of his followers were old news. These first thirteen verses of the Little Apocalypse refer to those times, already in the past for Mark’s readers, with a message that endured and was still relevant for them: *The one who endures to the end* – not the end of time, but the *telos*, the fulfillment of God’s purpose *– will be saved.*

Jesus knows that the path of discipleship is not easy and that hard times lie ahead for his disciples, just as Mark knows that his readers are facing hard times themselves. The common message for all of them is: Hang in there. Persevere to the end! Do not expect that this road will be easy, for it will not be! Jesus had told them so when he said, “*If you would be my disciple, then deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me*.” That cross seemed somewhat vague in Jesus’ teaching until the reality of persecution arose. Then it became all too real! It is one thing to persevere in faith and faithfulness when the threat is not at the door; it is quite another to do so when the threat is knocking your door down! Jesus’ apocalyptic words to his disciples are intended to prepare them for those times, not to inspire fear or curious calculation of the exact time, but to inspire faith, courage, and hope with which they might persevere. As theologian Tony Jones puts it:

*The ultimate message of Jesus’ apocalyptic statements end up being the same as that of his comforting Sermon on the Mount: God is in charge, God will win the battle against evil, and even if it seem scary at points, everything will turn out all right.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

African-American slaves understood this, and perhaps that is why they so readily identified with those in the Bible who suffer and embraced so readily the hopeful message of the end times and God’s ultimate triumph over the forces of evil. In her chapter on Apocalypse in her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris writes:

*There is always hurt in apocalyptic literature; it always addresses a threatened, marginal community. Those who speak of apocalypse – Daniel addressing the nation of Israel in exile, Jesus on the road to Calvary* (in Mark*), weeping over Jerusalem, John of Patmos writing from prison to the persecuted Christians of the first century - have very little stake in the status quo. In America, those who most cherish the language of apocalypse have traditionally come from the margins of society... For some reason we human beings seem to learn best how to love when we’re a bit broken, when our plans fall apart, when our myths of our self-sufficiency and goodness and safety are shattered. Apocalypse is meant to bring us to our senses, allowing us a sobering, and usually painful, glimpse of what is possible in the new life we build from the ashes of the old*. [[3]](#endnote-3)

If the end times seem particularly near at hand these days, perhaps it is because we are feeling more vulnerable than usual, less self-sufficient and secure, and are longing for God to come among us and set things right. Perhaps in the midst of the current chaos we may be more open to what God might do in us and through us these days. Jesus encourages his disciples to be alert, to keep awake, to be ready for that day and hour that he tells them is coming, even if no one knows exactly when that will be. But he also warns them about those who would lead them astray with false prophecies, false claims, and great temptations.

Beware when you face adversity, Jesus says, not IF you face adversity, but WHEN you face adversity. Such times try your faith and test your faithfulness, so beware! For, those who endure to the end, whenever the end comes, will be saved. Beware of complacency as you wait for the end times,

beware of prophecies that claim to know when the end will come, beware of thinking you will have a plenty of notice before the end,

beware of procrastinating,

for the time to get your life and faith in order is now!

And be **aware** that the day will surely come,

that God will sustain you in your waiting,

that in the midst of all the wars and rumors of wars,

in the midst of global earthquakes, pandemics, fires, and floods,

God is still at work, still with us, still calling us

to persevere and be faithful, hopeful, loving, and patient

while we wait and wait and wait

for a day that will surely come –

a day that just might be today! Amen

1. Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, Westminster John Knox Press: 2014, p.7 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tony Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?,* HarperOne:2015, p.71 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kathleen Norris, “Apocalypse” in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Riverhead Books:1998, pp.320-321 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)