



## Sermon for Sunday, November 17<sup>th</sup> 2024

The Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner St. John's Cathedral, Spokane

[Daniel 12:1-3](#)

[Psalm 16](#)

[Hebrews 10:11-25](#)

[Mark 13:1-8](#)

What a delight to be with you all today! Heather and I have talked for over five years about doing a pulpit swap for a Sunday. And we're finally doing it! She is over in Coeur d'Alene at St. Luke's this morning, and I'm here with you at St. John's.

We're going to begin with a little sing-along. Join me if you know the song.

*It's the end of the world as we know it.  
It's the end of the world as we know it.  
It's the end of the world as we know it.  
And I feel fine.<sup>1</sup>*

Many thanks to R.E.M.! How many of you knew this song?

Songs have come out from several generations that have recited lists of the tremendous and terrible things happening and unfolding. We have this "End of the World" song by R.E.M.. We have "We didn't start the fire" by Billy Joel. They are both long recitations in verse of the multitude of things happening in a period of time that dazzle and distress and disgust and alarm, that seem like efforts to light the world ablaze. And the cry from each of these songs is, "I'm just gonna keep going. We're just gonna keep going."

There isn't a generation that at some point hasn't felt like "This is it. This is the end."

And today, on this next-to-last Sunday in our Church year before we come again to the season of Advent, as our year of scripture readings and seasons ends, we come to readings that point to the conclusion of history and the end of the world.

Let's spend some time with these thoughts about the end of the world as we know it. Through the centuries, people have thought about and worried about the end of the world. I want to explore with you the temptations of such thinking, the different ways Christians have thought about "the End Times," and what Jesus has to say about all of this.

We Christians believe that there is a great arc to history, and that it moves toward a time unknown when this creation as we know it will come to a conclusion, and when the "new heaven and new earth" will begin. As we say in our creeds, "We believe that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

But, as we heard the disciples ask in this week's Gospel passage from Mark, we find ourselves tugged from time to time to ask the same question, "When will these things happen?" They are especially

---

<sup>1</sup> "It's the end of the world as we know it," by R.E.M., 1987. Universal Music Publishing Group. Song viewable at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0GFRCfm-aY>.

concerned about the Temple being destroyed – and, it was destroyed, close to in their lifetimes. They are in fear and revulsion of the Roman Empire, they are hoping for the Messiah, and they are dreading the time leading up to the Messiah’s coming.

They want to know the answers.

We are no different. Like Jesus’ disciples, we admire the things we humans have built, and we want things to last forever. Want to hold on to our edifices – our great inventions, our monuments and capital buildings, our great churches and cathedrals and temples. Like Jesus’ disciples, we want to know how and when things are going to unravel. If things aren’t going to last, we want to know when changes are going to happen and destruction is going to come. We want the security of knowing. Like Jesus’ disciples, we want to know the secrets of the cosmos and its turning, the world and its future.

Jesus’ response is important for us.

*“Watch out that no one deceives you. Many people will come in my name, saying, ‘I’m the one!’ They will deceive many people. When you hear of wars and reports of wars, don’t be alarmed. These things must happen, but this isn’t the end yet. Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other, and there will be earthquakes and famines in all sorts of places. These things are just the beginning of the sufferings associated with the end.*

*(Mark 13:5-8, Common English Bible)*

Seductions of certainty are so alluring. Seductions of secret knowledge are so, well, seductive. We love the idea that we will win the game of history by seeking solutions and securities, learning how to predict the future. And so, the seductions of trying to be soothsayers, of knowing exact dates or signs of the end, are just so hard to resist. And then, when someone arises who says, “I know how this is going to turn out,” or “It will all go wrong unless you follow me,” or “I alone can make things right, I am the anointed one,” it is just so tempting to get sucked in and yield ourselves to that packaging of all our fears turned to hopes and promises.

This is what Jesus is warning against. We dare not allow ourselves to be tugged or yanked about by anyone promising to be “the great deliverer” or any other kind of king or messiah – for the Church, for our nation, or for the world. It can be tempting to succumb to such deception or manipulation, especially if the world around us seems to be flocking to anyone.

In the book of Daniel, and again in the book of Revelation, this is how the great powers arise that turn out to be enemies of the ways of God. We heard today of a great promise that comes to Daniel at the end of his visions. But before this, he sees a march through parts of history of rulers and kingdoms and empires that rise and fall – and especially some visions of rulers whose interests are only for themselves and their own power, who have utter disdain for God or for any gods other than themselves. The promise we heard today is that Michael, the great Prince of the people of Israel and one of the great archangels, will arise and bring deliverance and resurrection of life to the people.

But it will continue to be difficult, age to age. And in every age, in every war, and in every contest for power and for causes, prayers have been uttered to the Most High or to other high gods for victory. In the Russian Orthodox Church during this current war with Ukraine, priests have been instructed to pray for victory, and priests who have prayed instead for peace have been put under discipline. During our Civil War, prayers were written and prayed from pulpits in North and South for victory and for the upholding of their righteous cause. Here is one I found when searching for prayers at the end of the world and in troubled times – from a collection of such prayers in the library of the University of North Carolina:

*Gracious Father, the life of man is a warfare upon earth, and the dangers which assault us are diversely pointed against us. We humbly beseech Thee be present with us in all the course and passages of our lives, but especially in the Secession we have undertaken, and the hostilities in which it has involved us. Suffer no malice, or treachery, or stratagem--whether civil, diplomatic, or military, to hurt us; no cunning to circumvent us; no surprises to overtake or discomfit us; no falsehood to betray us...*<sup>2</sup>

... And the prayer goes on from there.

Oh, we pray for our righteous causes and the demise of those who oppose them. And we build our towers and temples to remind us of our rightness. And we are terrified when our causes and our towers crumble, and name it the End of the World.

So, you may be familiar with some ideas associated with the End of the World – the great tribulation when things in the world turn to the worst, the reign of Christ for a thousand years (or millennium), and a rapture that calls the living and dead in Christ from the horrors of the world unfolding in the great tribulation. These ideas are drawn from apocalyptic literature in the Bible and a few additional verses from some of the Epistles.

- There are pre-millennialists, who hold that Jesus' reign for 1000 years will come but only after a great tribulation that will overtake the world – when all gets darker and more wicked until it seems all hope is lost, and then Jesus will return and break open the kingdom, binding evil forces to await their final judgment.
- There are the post-millennialists, who hold that the reign of Christ will be brought to fruition gradually as the followers of Jesus bring out transformation and restoration in the world, bit by bit, as they take part in bringing out the birth of the kingdom and the end of wickedness.
- There are the a-millennialists, who hold that the reality of the kingdom of God is beyond time and has already begun, and is what we enter even now in baptism – and that the reign of Christ has begun and will continue to unfold through the ages to come.

Well, you can guess where most evangelical and fundamentalist beliefs align – with pre-millennialism. The world will be taken by the forces of evil, by the devil, and by the Antichrist (usually anticipated as someone quite specific). But wait, don't lose heart, because we can pick up on a few verses in one of the Epistles to assure us that Jesus will rescue the faithful from the Great Tribulation by calling all of us to ascend and be taken to dwell with him. That's the Rapture.

Well, that's one version – pre-tribulation, the belief that the Rapture will occur before everything really falls apart. There's also post-tribulation, the belief that the Church will go through the Great Tribulation and suffer the onslaughts of evil, before Christ calls us all home and then returns on us to institute a 100 years reign.

This stuff is very, very real to a lot of people, folks. And people have spent incredible amounts of energy trying to read signs of the times, always with eyes and anxieties tapped into what might be triggers and signals that the end is here.

There have been exact years and even days pinpointed by Christians seeking to predict when Christ would return. 500 A.D., 1491, October 9<sup>th</sup> 1553, 1694, 1829, 1836, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1844 (the day known as "The Great Disappointment"), 1914, 1975 – just to name a few. I remember a tract from my childhood pointing to 1988 as the year. We heard before that 2012 might be it. We have seen folks point at this leader or that leader as the

---

<sup>2</sup> "Prayers suitable for the times in which we live," Charleston, 1861. Accessed from the University of North Carolina Library, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/prayers/prayers.html#:~:text=Bless%20us%20with%20wisdom%20in,restore%20our%20liberty%20and%20peace>.

Antichrist, this new technology or that one as the “Mark of the Beast.” It is an obsession with the books of Revelation and Daniel, and a misreading of them as future fortunes meant to reveal the future if only we can get to the secrets lurking beneath the surface.

This grips imaginations so much that it overrides a focus on the Gospel of Christ and on the call to live now and to find and experience now as the moment of grace, of salvation, of healing, and the dawn of the kingdom of God.

I remember when Heather and I were together in the birthing room in the hospital in Walnut Creek, California, where our younger child was born. As Heather was in labor, we had a sweet nurse attending. She was very excited to learn that we were both clergy. She asked, “Oh, are you pre-trib or post-trib?” Heather, in the midst of birthpangs, just looked at me, confused by this code language she had not learned. I had grown up with it. I had also moved away from it. But here we were, in the birthpangs, and here is our nurse trying to chase the signs of the times. “Are you pre-trib or post-trib?” As she is poking into Heather’s inner arm to prep and intravenous tube into her vein – and misses the vein. She apologized. I dismissed the question and don’t really remember what I said. But both Heather and I – Heather more than I! – were thinking “Hey! Eyes on the road! Let’s stay focused on what’s in the room here!”

Hey! Eyes on the road! I think that’s what Jesus is saying to his disciples here in our Gospel passage for this week.

Eyes on the road. Don’t get sucked into the allure of building something that dazzles. Don’t get sucked into the seductions of looking for the final moment of God’s judgment on the world – a lure so easily fed by fear and anger, and by a mix of disgust at “evil” others and pride at being in the “right” camp.

There will continue to be wars and conflicts, and disasters in the world. But Jesus says, “It’s not the end yet.” Many around us are enamored with thinking that the “last days” are about to happen any time now, and are busy trying to predict when it will all happen. This is not being faithful to Jesus.

And, all these events, these are only the birthpangs. So, keep your eyes on the road. Stick with today, with this moment, with the journey along the Way today, here and now. We should certainly stay aware of what is happening – but more importantly, live faithfully each day, helping, defending, aiding, and strengthening people around us as much as we can.

A story is told of a traveler seeing St. Francis tending a garden, hoeing a row of beans. The traveler asked the saint, “What would you do if you knew this was the last day of your life?” St. Francis, without looking up, said, “I would continue to hoe this row of beans.”

No matter what, no matter if it truly is toward the end of the world, we are faithful when we continue to live our lives and to give of ourselves and Christ gave himself for us all. We rise together, as the letter to the Hebrews says, with confidence, full assurance, and courage that comes from Christ who is already victorious. Each day, we encourage and spur each other on to give ourselves for the sake of and for the love of the world.

And remember, we end the Church year with a celebration of Christ the King. We trust how the story ends – and how it already has begun.