

***COME AGAIN?***  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Mark 13: 3-7 (NRSV)**

**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 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 birth pangs.**

Last Monday I started thinking about this morning’s sermon. Christians are still in the Holy Season of Eastertide and I thought about preaching from Psalm 16. But I could not ignore the natural disasters that have devastated so many throughout the Southeast this week. The death toll now exceeds 340, with many scores of people injured, and property losses in the hundreds of millions. Add to all of this the roaring fires that have blazed through Texas the past few weeks, the jolting rise in gasoline prices, and mounting tensions in the Middle East. This week was one of the deadliest for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and we are creeping into warfare in Libya. I know that the radical right is already making hay with these catastrophes, claiming that they are a result of gay marriage in the U.S. and the election of President Obama, whom they claim is a Muslim.

We can put all of that nonsense aside and consider the concerns that just about anybody has about war, rumors of wars, and every kind of natural disaster human beings have ever experienced. You know the questions. Why does God allow this to happen? Or, why does God make this happen? You also hear people who survive

these kinds of catastrophes comment how thankful they are that God has spared their lives. That always begs the question of why God did not spare other lives. In Choctaw County, Mississippi a Louisiana State Trooper was camping with his young daughter when a tornado rampaged through their campsite. The father threw his body on his child to shield her. He saved her life but lost his own to protect her. What is God's place in that equation?

All of these questions presume that either God is the first cause of all things past, present and future; or that God determines the outcomes of all events; or that God may intervene in some supernatural way in any matter natural and human. I don't know about you but I am never satisfied with these assumptions and the conclusion that God spares some but not others. That is only a partial answer that brings relief to a few and heartbreak to many. It does not speak well of a God whose love is said to be impartial.

I remember my grandmother weeping at the death of my mother. "It is not supposed to be this way," she said. "It's just not natural for a mother to bury two of her daughters. I was supposed to die first." But there are many stories like hers where children die long before their parents, or they suffer major physical, emotional, and cognitive disabilities.

When Jesus told his followers that there would be wars and rumors of wars, and just about every catastrophe possible, he was talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The City of Peace and the Jews' revered House of God will crumble before their eyes. All of this would happen as a harbinger of the Kingdom of God. It is certainly the case the Jerusalem fell to the Roman Empire in 70

of the Common Era, the Temple crushed beneath the feet of Caesar's legions. But we are still waiting for the kingdom. And God knows there have been all kinds of wars, bloodshed, earthquakes, tsunamis, and tornadoes but little sign that the Kingdom of God has been established.

When I hear the words about war, its rumors, and natural disasters I hear Jesus saying to me, "Don't inflate these events with religious presumptions. Don't read into the tornado that leveled so much of Tuscaloosa, AL., too much about the purposes of God. The Black Death of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century reduced Europe's population by 30%, causing the death of nearly a million people. The Bubonic plague, hurricanes, and droughts are facts of life. In and of themselves they do not speak much of God and have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. Yes, they are terribly important to us. Lives are lost, families disrupted, economies are weakened or destroyed, and the meaning of life and death take on a nuance we never imagined.

This seems to be the way that life is and Jesus tells me that I need to be wary of preachers who try to interpret the will of God over events that just naturally occur. I think that even applies to the horrible things that people do to each other. I do not believe we will ever see universal peace in our time. The sex trafficking trade will continue right along with other forms of prostitution and pornography. People will be unfaithful to their spouses, theft and deception will be rampant, and we will assault one another with words, knives, and guns. In today's social climate people are increasingly polarized in their political, church, and community life. Fred Phelps' protest and the picketing of military funerals with his signs that read "God Hates

Fags,” is the very kind of preacher Jesus warns us about. Indeed, Mr. Phelps is just another frazzled strand of violence on the America scene.

On Easter Sunday, in an interview with ABC’s Christiana Amanpour, the Rev. Franklin Graham said he believes the end is near. He has suggested that events like the earthquake and tsunami in Japan just might be indicators. In speaking of the apocalypse, Graham said,

"The Bible says that every eye is going to see it. And you know, I thought -- how in the whole world is that going to happen?" he said. How is the whole world going to see him all at one time? Unless all of a sudden everyone's taking pictures and it's in the media worldwide. Social media could have a big part in that."<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion is that we will all witness it and be able to photograph it with our smart phones, Twitter the event, and post it to our Facebook page. Go figure!

Since the pages of the New Testament, specifically the letters of Paul to the Romans, Corinthians, and Thessalonians, preachers around the world have predicted the second coming of Christ. And after nearly 2,000 years the message that “The End is Near and Jesus is Coming,” has proven to be wrong. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said we should beware the false prophets.

The truth of the matter is that we will all die and the earth will eventually be destroyed. Assuming that human beings do not kill the earth with pollutants or blow it up with nuclear bombs, scientists have shown us that the sun will burn out making life on the planet uninhabitable. A meteor that would bring universal catastrophe could strike us. The tectonic plates of the earth could shift immeasurably and throw the earth off its axis. There are all kinds of natural events that could bring us all to our

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<sup>1</sup> As reported in the New York Daily News at: [www.NYDailyNews.com](http://www.NYDailyNews.com), April 26, 2011.

end and probably will at some point in the future. As you may know, the Mayan calendar predicts that the end of the world will occur in 2012. How do you imagine the media will report that? Paul Kavanagh speculates that the media would cover it something like this.

USA Today: WE'RE DEAD

The Wall Street Journal: DOW JONES PLUMMETS AS WORLD ENDS

National Enquirer: O.J. AND NICOLE, TOGETHER AGAIN

Playboy: GIRLS OF THE APOCALYPSE

Microsoft Systems Journal: APPLE LOSES MARKET SHARE

Victoria's Secret Catalog: OUR FINAL SALE

Sports Illustrated: GAME OVER

Wired: THE LAST NEW THING

Rolling Stone: THE GRATEFUL DEAD REUNION TOUR

Readers Digest: 'BYE

Discover Magazine: HOW WILL THE EXTINCTION OF ALL LIFE AS WE KNOW IT AFFECT THE WAY WE VIEW THE COSMOS?

TV Guide: DEATH AND DAMNATION: NIELSON RATINGS SOAR!<sup>2</sup>

No one really knows when or how the end will come. I think we err by spending so much time and energy speculating about the end of time and how it will happen. Christianity has spent too much time worrying about where a person is going to spend eternal life to the neglect of how people are living this life. I believe that if

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Kavanagh, "End of the World Jokes," <http://www.paulkavanagh.com/en/End-of-the-World-Jokes-Doomsday-Apocalypse-Mayan-2012-Joke.html>. Downloaded April 29, 2011.

we focus on how we live the life that God has given us the rest will take care of itself. The New Testament is quite clear that the Kingdom of God is very much about human life on this earth and in this time. When Jesus prayed, "Give us this day our daily bread," he was speaking of nothing less than the barley and wheat that were ground to bake bread in every home in first century Palestine.

Regardless of how much time any of us have the central question is whether or not we live our lives with all of the justice and compassion we can muster. Do we love our neighbors as our selves, and do we love God with all of our hearts and minds? In the Kingdom of God you cannot separate the love of God from the love of neighbor. Every time I think I have all of my questions answered about God, Jesus puts a neighbor in the way.

Remember that when the Bible talks about "Eternal life" it is talking about the presence of God. I mean the presence of God in the here and now, with these people, your family, and your neighbors near and far. Eternal life does not begin with the end of the world. Let me tell you a story about "Eternal life."

A nurse escorted a tired, anxious young man to the bed side of an elderly man. "Your son is here," she whispered to the patient. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened. He was heavily sedated because of the pain medication he was taking for his cancer. He dimly saw the young man standing outside the oxygen tent.

He reached out his hand and the young man tightly wrapped his fingers around it, squeezing a message of encouragement. The nurse brought a chair next to the bedside. All through the night the young man sat holding the old man's hand, and

offering gentle words of hope. The dying man said nothing as he held tightly to his son.

As dawn approached, the patient died. The young man placed on the bed the lifeless hand he had been holding, and then he went to notify the nurse. While the nurse did what was necessary, the young man waited. When she had finished her task, the nurse began to say words of sympathy to the young man.

But he interrupted her. "Who was that man?" He asked. The startled nurse replied, "I thought he was your father."

"No, he was not my father," he answered. "I never saw him before in my life."

"Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?" asked the nurse.

He replied, "I knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn't here. When I realized he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, I knew how much he needed me."<sup>3</sup>

I believe that this is the essence of faith – not speculating about the end of the world, but healing the world wherever we can in all of the simple ways that we can. In my mind this is the Christian response to wars and rumors of wars, natural and manmade disasters.

On this morning, May 1, 2011 there are people all over this city, throughout the United States, and across the globe who are suffering, lonely, frightened, and dying. You will come across them at some point during the week, if not this very afternoon. Like the young man in the story you may be able to do nothing more that

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<sup>3</sup> Author unknown. It's an old one.

sit with them and be their brother or sister, son or daughter. Maybe all you can do is hold their hand. Maybe they will never recognize you. But I tell you this; you are doing the work of the Kingdom. You are God present to them. And regardless of the fate of that man or woman your time with them is eternal life.

*Finis*