

“Live like You’re Dying”

Hebrews 10: 11-14, 19-25, Mark 13: 1-8

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Lynne M. Dolan

It is hard to believe we are quickly approaching the end of another year. Soon we will usher in the second decade of the new millennium. How many of you remember what it was like anticipating the arrival of the year 2000? So many people acted like Chicken Little announcing that the sky was falling. People frantically made Y2K plans to protect them from any disaster that may occur when the clock struck midnight. Perhaps such trouble would not be obvious right away; however some people thought that a series of events would ultimately lead to the demise of civilization, as we know it. People worried that computer systems would crash and this would set off even more cataclysmic reactions. Our power grids would fail. We would run out of food and heat and sanitary conditions after a period of time. Some people spent extravagant amounts of money on New Year’s Eve parties thinking it was the last time to celebrate before the end of the world. (More likely it was just an excuse to throw a big party!) This gives new meaning to the warning, “live like you’re dying!” Not surprisingly for many, the clocks struck midnight and nothing happened. It was no different from any other New Year’s Eve. We looked around, breathed a sigh of relief and went to bed.

Many people are obsessed with this end of time nonsense. Perhaps I show my bias by calling it nonsense. Predicting the end of the world has become big business. People have been writing about the end of the world for thousands of years. This weekend the film 2012 was released. It is based on an ancient Mayan prediction that the world would end on December 21, 2012. I have not seen the film, however if you watch television, you can not miss the commercials. Such films provide Hollywood’s special effect gurus a vehicle to showcase their amazing talents. If you like to see things blow up and people being swallowed up by the earth, you will love this film. It is nothing more than entertainment. It is hard for our psyches to absorb the real horror brought about by real catastrophes like earthquakes or tsunamis or hurricanes, so we create fantasy worlds like the one depicted in 2012 in order to make sense of such things. What we so often fail to understand is there is no making sense of such mysteries. These kinds of disasters happen all the time and it does not necessarily mean that God is ushering in the end of the world nor does it mean God is condemning humankind for their sinful ways.

As we meet Jesus and the disciples in the story this morning he is trying to prepare them for the end, his end and perhaps the ultimate end. Things were about to change, in drastic and dramatic ways, and Jesus is preparing them for those changes. As they walk with Jesus the disciples marvel at the grandeur and the beauty of the temple. Jesus warns them not to become attached to such things. They are merely buildings. He goes on to predict the destruction of this beautiful temple. Such a prediction would have been startling for them to hear. After all, this was the center of their religious life. It would have been like Jesus predicting the complete destruction of the Vatican. That architecture holds such significance for millions of believers. However, the religious authority does not rest in the physical structure. Authority rests in the people who occupy that structure. This is

what Jesus wants the disciples to understand. Changes will come. Major changes will come, however, even if the physical structures are destroyed, their spiritual foundation can not be shaken.

Jesus warns his disciples to be alert and to hone their best discernment skills. People will come claiming they know when the end is coming. They will tell us what to do and how to live. They will try to lead us astray from the message that Jesus has planted in us. They will point to signs that in their estimation clearly indicate the end is near. When we experience wars and famine and earthquakes we might begin to wonder if the end is near. Jesus tells us not to ignore such things, however these events do not mean that the world is coming to an end.

Perhaps all the Y2K hoopla was not so silly after all. As we approached that moment many of us pondered questions we might otherwise not have considered. What would you do differently if the end of the world were imminent? What if you were told you only had 6 months to live? What would you change? Where would you go? What relationships would you mend? With whom would you spend your time? This passage from Mark is called the "little apocalypse." It allows us the luxury of contemplating our own mortality. What would we do differently as a spiritual community if our time were limited? Would we be bold in our proclamation of justice? Would we be more prophetic? Would we speak the truth in love in a way that we normally do not because now there is nothing to lose?

Jesus is calling us to a *both/and* kind of discipleship. He invites us to live with the intensity of the last days, to live like you're dying, even though this is not so. The writer Mary Anderson says that Jesus "reminds us that we are not ultimately invested in this world, and he liberates us to work with courage, with hope. End times call for tall towers of hope. They call for a lightening-speed reordering of priorities. End times call for alertness, sharpness. They tingle with expectation. They are times of uncertainty and fear only for those whose faith is thin."

I believe we live in such times. I also believe that our faith is not thin! Some days it feels like the end is near. We wonder what will happen if global warming continues unabated and the ice caps keep melting. Will that lead to the end of the world? We worry about the effects of deforestation. Will that be the event that triggers the chain reaction of destruction? We can see what happens when we build huge homes on the California coast. In our zeal to capture the stunning views that such locations offer we fail to consider the impact this growing infrastructure has on the ecosystem. We don't worry until there is a mudslide or a wild fire and hundreds of lives hang in the balance. We have come to this place because we have ignored the word and will of God. We have placed our own wants and desires ahead of the needs of the community and God's creation. We do what makes us happy and then cross our fingers as the storm or fire or wall of mud approaches.

Too often we are impressed by the wrong things. A corporation that can construct a huge building in its name and fill it with willing workers must be very powerful; until it goes belly up and it is left as an empty edifice to corporate greed and misconduct. We build walls to protect ourselves and to keep the undesirable ones out, until justice prevails and that wall comes tumbling down. We recently marked the 20th anniversary of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. How wonderful it was to see the footage of its demolition. It may have taken a short time to destroy the physical wall, however the walls of mistrust and oppression that led to its construction take longer to dismantle. Where one wall comes down, we so often construct another. Many believe the wall the Israelis are building in the middle of Palestinian territory will not bring peace in the Middle East, nor will the wall the U.S. is building on the Mexican border bring an end to illegal immigration. One writer says, “our trust should not be in buildings or walls or corporations or defense systems; our trust should only be in God, and in the strategies that Jesus proclaimed: peacemaking, loving one’s enemies, and forgiving those who have wronged us.”

Jesus knew his way was radically different from the status quo. He did not come to change a few things in the existing spiritual and political systems. He came to make radical changes; changes that would turn the world upside down. Jesus assures us that the coming of the kingdom will truly bring catastrophic changes, especially to structures of death that oppress and exclude those who seek justice, mercy and love. Perhaps that is what we see happening today as we engage in this debate over health care. The vision of health care for all people is a radical one. In order to achieve this it would mean major changes in the health care delivery system as we know it. It would mean dismantling systems that are oppressive and exclusionary in favor of a system that would benefit all citizens. It would make health care a right and not a privilege. For some envisioning such a thing is like seeing the temple crumble. It is traumatic and frightening. I do not wish to debate the merits or deficits of any particular approach. I do however believe that such a debate is not merely political, but spiritual as well. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to care for the widows and orphans, for those who are marginalized. We can overcome our fears and approach the debate faithfully and respectfully.

Talk of the end times is frightening. The ultimate end of the world is something we can not control. It may happen tomorrow or it may happen thousands of years from today. We can however, do our part, to hasten its arrival. We are not completely helpless. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us to live faithfully with one another. In this in-between time, he encourages us to carry on in the life of faith. We are to encourage each other, provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together,” he says, “as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” This is a call not to isolate ourselves and to adopt a fortress mentality, but to continue to live in loving community with one another. Everyone is frightened and a bit anxious. No one knows exactly what the future will bring, but that does not mean we should hide ourselves away in fear.

The world is a frightening place. Things are changing at lightening speed. It is hard to know what is true and what is mere hyperbole. It is easy to mistrust one's neighbor, to

lose compassion, to take care of one's own needs before you worry about someone else. It is in such difficult times that Jesus calls us to a deeper discipleship, to make even more significant sacrifices, to offer a more honest assessment of our own life and the choices we make. Out of this turmoil God is preparing us for something new. Jesus declares, "This is but the beginning of the birthpangs." May it be so! Amen

Source:

Mary W. Anderson, "Times Up" *The Christian Century*, November 1, 2003, p. 19.