

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Daniel 12:1-3 Hebrews 10:11-25 Mark 13:1-8
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
November 14, 2021 [Traditional]

In chapter 13 of the gospel of Mark, Jesus talks about the end of the world. We call it the “little apocalypse.” Matthew and Luke have similar apocalyptic chapters where Jesus speaks about judgment day. First of all, let’s think about the millions of dollars that people have raked in writing books and making movies and making predictions about the end of the world. Especially when times are uncertain (like now), people latch on to these predictions...and also other predictive stuff like astrology. The reason is simple. I want to know what to expect so I can prepare myself for the future as well as I can. I would love to have a crystal ball that actually worked.

And underneath that is a deep ocean of anxiety and fear. It’s part of being born into sin. Practically everything we do every day as human beings, we do in preparation for an unknown future. Whether that future is a test the teacher is going to give us tomorrow, an assignment from our boss at work, an important meeting coming up, a job one of our customers wants us to do, harvesting a field, getting the kids fed and clothed and out the door in the morning before school. The smallest actions we take are a preparation for the future. Unless I prepare for it, that future is going to control *me*, God forbid. I feel that unknown coming at me all the time. Sometimes it's scary, it's threatening. We might not think consciously of the future all the time, but we're certainly attuned to it. From the future is where new possibilities, new life, is going to come to me. But sometimes bad things are going to strike me from that direction, too.

It's amazing how much our understanding, or our expectation of what the future holds determines how we live our daily lives today. Sometimes we live for the future so much that we can't even see today for what it is. I think a lot of people are living only for their future, and that's not a happy life—it's filled with anxiety. You don't appreciate the here and now. You stop seeing God's everyday miracles. I've seen parents who are so uptight about their kids' future, and getting their kids to where they want them to be, that they don't even know their kids. It's hard for them to fully invest in that relationship in the here and now, because they're so invested in a future vision. It happens in marriages, too.

I remember a time when I became especially aware of just how anxious I always am about the future. We were on vacation at a lake cabin in Maine, one summer. And there was no one else on that lake. No boats on the water, no one in the other cabins. Just the quiet forest surrounding the water. One afternoon, I got on a big inner-tube and paddled out about a hundred yards from shore. I just laid there on my back with my eyes closed. And this was the deepest silence and stillness I have ever experienced. Not a single leaf rustling. No bird or insect noise. No bull moose bellowing for his mate.

In that utter silence and stillness, guess what was going on in my brain: *I gotta do this, I gotta do that, I got this coming up*. One anxious thought after another—it was *loud* in there! I was amazed. Like—I wonder how often I can really see what's right in front of my nose if my mind, my heart, my spirit, are so anxious about what's next!...anxious about the future. After a while

everything calmed down and became completely quiet inside me. In my inmost being, for a moment, I experienced the stillness. And I went...(*startle*). I startled like when you wake up from a fall in your dreams. I could hear God chuckling at me, saying “nice of you to show up, Seth.” The lesson: I can spend so much time trying to get to the God of the future that I can miss out on what the Holy Spirit is doing right here and now.

What does this have to do with Jesus talking about the end of the world? Well, the anxiety that makes me to try to control the future even while I’m alone on an inner tube on the middle of a lake is the same anxiety that makes me put my trust in things that can’t help me, and listen to false prophets. When Jesus tells them that the Jerusalem temple is going to be destroyed, notice the disciples’ first reaction: “*when*...when is all this terrible destruction going to take place?” They want to be prepared for it, so they can come out alive on the other side of it. And Jesus’ answer, when it comes down to it, is that it *doesn’t matter when* it’s all going to happen. It doesn’t matter WHEN the earth is coming to an end or when the final judgment is going to happen. You cannot dig a cave deep enough. You’re not going to have enough supplies. The only thing that’s going to be important on that day is who you’re going to meet.

Jesus gives us that beautiful message: “don’t be afraid.” If you already know and love and trust the One who holds your future in his hands, and he is the One who died on a cross for you, and rose for you, you can live right now without fear of that future. If you have been buried by baptism into his death, you’re not going to die again under any judgment. The old Adam, the old Eve, is dead in God’s eyes. Alone, we’re dead in ourselves. With Christ, we’ve already made it through to the other side. That is God’s own promise to you. He wants us to know it and believe it every day. We have risen with Christ. Through Jesus, we are made God’s own sons and daughters.

And you know what happens when we trust in that promise every day? What happens is, our fear and anxiety about the future turn into anticipation and hope for the future. That’s why Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy Kingdom Come.” We actually ask God to bring his kingdom to earth, even though we know that when his kingdom finally comes, this world will have to get out of the way. We pray “Thy Kingdom Come” even though we know it means that all the skyscrapers and temples and church buildings and capitols, and every worldly thing we’ve worked to build up in this world—it’s all going to crumble. Even so, we pray for the day to come, because we already know who’s coming on that day. The future was never going to be about anything we were building up here in this life. The future is Christ.

Believers can come across as strange birds to a lot of folks. Because on the one hand, we seem so pessimistic about human capabilities when it comes to controlling the future and having all the answers and achieving heaven on earth by our own efforts. At the same time, we have this optimism. Why do we Christians talk about letting go of the past and straining towards the future? Why, when we’re at our best as Christians, do we dive so deeply into this life and give the people around us all the love and attention we can? Why would we do that when we also know this world is coming to an end? It’s because we’re optimistic about God. We put all our hope in a God who was born in a stable. He wants so badly for us dying sinners to be with him in a relationship of love and joy that he will die to take away the darkness that separates us from

him. And he gives us a future with him. It's all about his love for us, here and now. We know his last word is resurrection.

This is why, when we see what's going on in the world right now, when we see people so enslaved to fear and hatred; or when we see people we love suffering; when we ourselves are dealing with sickness and pain; when we see the threat of violence on the horizon; when we see a world that cannot be fixed by human beings...in short, when we see all the signs that Jesus talks about in today's gospel, we say *God has this in hand*.

It's all just a reminder to us that yes, this world is coming to an end. Someday...we don't know when...but soon enough. As Christians, we don't wring our hands and get bogged down in worry and paralyzing fear. Instead, we keep diving in with confidence, helping strangers, raising our young people in Christ, loving each other, showing God's compassion, imitating Jesus himself, showing his strength and faithfulness and confidence, and above all—we keep pointing other people to the one who holds the future. We keep throwing seeds out into the field. We keep witnessing to Jesus, not to ourselves—we keep throwing the seeds, even if the world is on fire. Because we know that as painful as it might be, as heartbreaking as life can get, as ugly as people can get towards each other...it's all birth pangs. If you look into God's Word, you see a new world being born, in Jesus. And in Christ, the end of the story belongs to us. We can look forward to the One who is coming with power on the clouds, because we already know him: the one who was born in a manger, and who died on the cross for us.