

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

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 all 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 birthpangs.

The end is near! Are you prepared! These are words I clearly remember a street preacher shouting at us from the steps outside the Indiana State University Bookstore. He was not alone in proclaiming this message. Many other street preachers, tent revivalists, and television evangelists have proclaimed over the centuries.

With the advent of the 24-hour news channels and internet filling our news feeds with a constant bombardment of violence, hate, destruction and death it is easy to believe they may be right. The end is near!

There have always been wars and rumors of wars throughout human history, even the scriptures are filled stories of violence, wars, famine, destruction and death.

While we talk about Jesus being the embodiment of God’s love on earth, fully present with humans, defeating death on the cross, resurrecting to a new life for people, even his own message at times seems to point to the end of the world! Take our story in Mark.

Like many of us, the disciples, are just as curious about the end of the world.

Along with Jesus, they lived during the Roman Empire, in a land occupied by the Romans, who used torture, including crucifixion, and its military might to control the people of those lands.

The occupation of the World’s Super Power led to the rise of many “terrorist” organizations groups in the occupied countries, including in the home country of Jesus.

The Roman Emperor, Nero, fed up with the terrorist and their attacks, in 66 C.E. sent in the full might of Roman military to wipe out the terrorist threat, which they did. Then they turned their attention to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, enslaving some, using others for public humiliation and death for sport, scattering many others around the world.

It is widely accepted that Mark's Gospel is the earliest of the four gospels. Most scholars agree it was written between 65 - 70 AD, during Nero's persecution and the fall of Jerusalem.

This helps us understand the Gospel writer's words attributed to Jesus: **"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."**

The end times have fascinated, scared, scarred, and struck terror into the hearts of people throughout time.

We still hear preachers, politicians, and news sources claiming that this is, as the group R.E.M. sang - "The end of the World as we know it!"

While some may make this claim, even encouraging an all out war in the Middle East, this is not what Jesus nor the writer of Revelation were pointing to as the "end" of the world.

Listen to these words of verse 44, **"This is but the beginning of the birth pangs"**.

David Roberts, in an article in Pathos magazine, reflects on what these "birth pangs" mean for us: **"There will be wars, and rumors of wars, and wars that shake the foundations of the world and your faith in humanity. There will be death. There will be disaster. There will be all manner of things in this life to rattle your soul. There will be worry, anxiety, fear, hatred, racism, injustice, and terrorism. But this is not how the world ends. The world ends not with flammers, terror, blood and carnage. That not what our faith tells us. That's not what Jesus tells us today in the wake of violence and terrorism. He tells us, 'the end is yet to come. Fear not. This is not how the world ends.'**

**The world ends with peace, not violence. And that is the end of the world we look forward to. The end of this violent world, birthing a peaceful one, the end of an impoverished world, birthing a just one, the end of a hateful world, birthing a world pulsing with love!**

**Peace birthed from the depths of violence is a holy child indeed, because violence begets violence. Come, God our great midwife in the midst of our world birth pangs and labored groans for renewal! Come, help us birth a new world!"** (The Progressive Christian)

Birth leads to new life, new beginnings, new hope, a new vision for a new world.

Last Sunday, we stood in Lake Ripley Cemetery and read the following words from the Book of Revelation, a book many associate with the end of the world: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; they will be God’s peoples, and God himself will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’”

It is not the destruction of the world the writer speaks about. Rather, it is about God becoming fully present with us in new ways, where wars, violence and death and destruction will be no more, because God is making “all things new”.

Revelation 22 speaks to this even further with the images of the crystal clear, healing waters of the River of Life flowing through the new Jerusalem and the tree of Life bearing new fruit.

This is what Jesus was reminding the disciples of when he spoke about the “birth pangs”.

Birth is painful, or so I have been told and as I witnessed once. Birthing this new world is what we are called as the children of God, to actively work towards as Christ’s followers.

Yes, there is pain, suffering, death and destruction. Yes, there will always be wars and rumors of wars. And unfortunately, there will always be those individuals, groups, and even countries who claim to act in Christ’s name or on God’s orders to kill and destroy.

Jesus warns us about them. Instead, Jesus shows us how to live our lives together, to bring about the healing, life giving, love of God, which gives birth to a new world of peace, by facing down death together.

This is our calling. It is what we believe. It is our challenge as Christ’s followers to speak to and out for and to live into as a Christ did, showing the world God’s love.

It is what we are together, to give birth to each day, in each moment, in each interaction, in all our relationships - around the world, in Jerusalem, in Madison, and right here in Cambridge, even as we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

"Blessing When the World is Ending" by Jan Richardson

Look, the world  
is always ending  
somewhere.  
Somewhere  
the sun has come  
crashing down.  
Somewhere  
it has gone  
completely dark.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the gun,  
the knife,  
the fist.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the slammed door,  
the shattered hope.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with the utter quiet  
that follows the news  
from the phone,  
the television,  
the hospital room.  
Somewhere  
it has ended  
with a tenderness  
that will break  
your heart.

But, listen,  
this blessing means  
to be anything  
but morose.  
It has not come  
to cause despair.  
It is simply here  
because there is nothing  
a blessing  
is better suited for  
than an ending,  
nothing that cries out more  
for a blessing  
than when a world  
is falling apart.

This blessing  
will not fix you,  
will not mend you,  
will not give you  
false comfort;  
it will not talk to you  
about one door opening  
when another one closes.  
It will simply  
sit itself beside you  
among the shards  
and gently turn your face  
toward the direction  
from which the light  
will come,  
gathering itself  
about you  
as the world begins  
again.