

Date: November 16, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 33

SERMON: The End of the Beginning

Text(s): Mark 13:1-8; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

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Picture this scenario for a few moments. Times are bad. The economy is in an upheaval. There have been widespread crop failures and several small-scale wars have disrupted trade and industrial and agricultural production. A raging epidemic has killed nearly a fourth of the population. There are many voices calling for major structural and political reforms, some of them calling for revolution. In fact, many reforming and revolutionary groups have sprung up, some of them based in universities and cities, others based in the countryside among the farmers.

One of these revolutionary movements is an extreme apocalyptic sect which is preaching that the End of the World is at hand. Calling themselves the Saints, and led by a charismatic leader who calls himself Elijah after the biblical prophet of the same name, they take over a major city, and impose a rule of terror where summary executions for disobedience to the Saints are routine. Polygamy and communal ownership of goods is imposed, and as their enemies cut off the supplies entering the city, they sink to cannibalism to survive. The prophet's charismatic personality and his rhetorically-powerful speeches about the imminence of the End of the World are a classic study in the power of a charismatic and ruthless leader to control the masses.

Finally, after about two years, some of the saner townsfolk open the gates to the besieging armies, who promptly put an end to the self-styled prophet Elijah, killing many of the Saints and liberating those inhabitants who still have some notions of normality.

No, this is not the script for a Quentin Tarantino or David Lynch movie. Nor are they, though they could be, the scenarios played out in the series of best-selling books called the "Left Behind" series written by the apocalyptic

fundamentalist guru, Tim LaHaye. It may even evoke memories of the fiasco in Waco, Texas some years ago when the FBI stormed the compound where David Koresh and his Branch Davidians met the fiery apocalyptic end they envisioned.

This story actually happened in the city of Münster in Germany, and the year was 1533. The sect was a radical offshoot of the more generally moderate and pacifist Protestant reform movement known as the Anabaptists, the spiritual ancestors of present-day Mennonites. 1533 was the year the world was supposed to end, and it wasn't only a few radical sects who thought so. The belief was fairly widespread in northern Europe. Why 1533? For that matter, why 1844 or 1948 or any of the other dates that have been proposed by self-styled prophets of the apocalypse down through the years? In the particular case in Münster, the calculations were that 1500 years had passed since the birth of Christ, and added to that were the 33 years of Christ's life on earth, and therefore, *voilà*, the world was going to end. Apparently 1500 years was thought to be long enough for God to put up with incorrigibly wicked humanity. Thankfully, God seems to have been a bit more patient, and missed his deadline.

What is it with this fascination for calculating the date of the End of the World? Why do these weird and fantastic apocalyptic sects keep springing up, all convinced that the world is about to end, and somehow, despite the 100% failure rate in their predictions, manage, nonetheless to attract new adherents. Why have Tim LaHaye's highly fictionalized interpretations of the Book of Revelation under the camouflage of novels based on current world events become such runaway publishing bonanzas?

I suppose one key to why these apocalyptic notions survive and perpetuate themselves from generation to generation is that the world is a pretty scary place. Look around: it's Apocalypse Now, to borrow a phrase from movie producer Francis Ford Coppola. Just think of the really scary stuff that has happened within

the past few years— the SARS epidemic, the Ebola virus, the HIV/AIDS rampage through Africa, the September 11 attacks and the whole phenomenon of global terrorism. We take for granted the phenomenon of the globalization of world markets, where what happens today in Hong Kong has an immediate effect on what happens tomorrow in Stockholm or Paris or Buenos Aires, but who's managing all that? I'm not sure the captains of industry or the heads of central banks have much of an idea of how it can be managed either. It appears that the residents of South Harpswell are struggling with that very question of how to manage globalization as they contemplate the choice of whether or not to allow a multinational corporation to build a liquid natural gas terminal in their backyard. And what about the consequences of global warming or the growing science of genetic engineering? We go to the cinema to watch *Jurassic Park* to be entertained and terrified by the genetic manipulation that brings back the dinosaurs, and perhaps to help us forget the fact that we now have the genetic technology to do both far better and far worse things than reconstructing Tyrannosaurus Rex. It's enough to make even the bravest of us want to either pull the bedcovers up over our heads or give into the temptation to listen to the apocalyptic prophets who tell us confidently that Jesus is about to appear in the clouds and rescue us from all of this. More likely, we just try to amass enough wealth to insulate ourselves from all of it as best we can. We may not be able to do much about the frightening things in the world around us, but at least we can give ourselves the illusion of enough security and comfort to last for our own lifetimes.

If there is a difference between now and what happened in Münster in the 1500's, it's that now we really do have the capability of bringing on the End of the World ourselves. No longer do we dare voice a glib confidence in human rationality, in our ability to solve our problems. Now the prophets of doom are not only to be

found in weird sects or the lunatic fringe, but among our chief scientists and our deepest thinkers. We're forced to face the truth as stated in the old comic strip character Pogo's parody of the immortal words of John Paul Jones, "We have met the enemy, and they is us."

So when we read our Gospel lesson from this strange thirteenth chapter in Mark's gospel, it shouldn't, perhaps, sound quite so strange to us after all. It was written in times that were apocalyptic like ours. The Romans, fed up with the incessant rebellion in Judea, had just destroyed Jerusalem, and, more importantly, destroyed the symbol of Jewish identity and cohesiveness, the Temple. Little wonder that people in Mark's community were questioning whether the world was about to end. Is this it? Are these events the sign? Should we put on our white robes and get ready to be ushered into the Kingdom of God?

Mark offers us some sayings of Jesus which help us gain an important perspective on the apocalyptic times in which we live. He cautions against interpreting the normal disasters and carryings on of the wicked as signs that the world and human history are about to come to an imminent end. "*Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; these must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes and famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.*"

As every mother knows, the onset of labor pains marks both an end and a beginning. The onset of labor marks the end of pregnancy, the end of the long months of waiting. Yet that end is really a beginning— a birth, of which the onset of labor is the imminent sign. The labor itself may be long or short, relatively easy or terribly difficult, and always painful. It may be so hard that the mother feels like it's the end in the final

sense. Yet what mother does not realize, even amid the pain of labor, that it is not the beginning of the end, but merely the end of the beginning.

That phrase, “the end of the beginning,” entered our lexicon in one of the speeches Winston Churchill made when the heroic and outnumbered pilots of the Royal Air Force had fought the bombers of Goering’s Luftwaffe to a standstill, and when the armies of Hitler had bogged down before Stalingrad, and the threat of imminent invasion of Great Britain was past. It was at that moment that Churchill made his famous speech in which he said that the removal of the threat of invasion and the victory of the Battle of Britain in the air was not the beginning of the End; rather, he said, it was perhaps an end to the beginning. What he meant of course, was that there was plenty of hard fighting, hard struggle, many sacrifices, and much blood still to be shed before the final end of the war, and it would not do to ease up and feel that the war was won already. He was calling people to live in hope, to commit themselves to the struggle because the signs of the final end, which would be a new beginning, could already be glimpsed, with faith and hope, in the midst of the pain and hardship and sufferings of the present.

I believe that’s what Mark was saying to his beleaguered community as well, and what we need to hear in our own apocalyptic times. There is no shortage of self-styled prophets around who will claim to have it all figured out. And the ones who become leaders of sects like the Solar Temple or those who write fiction identifying the Pope or Osama bin Laden as the Antichrist are probably the least dangerous, because they’re the most obviously looney. More dangerous are those who appear to be the soul of reason and wisdom—those, for instance who tell us that science can solve all of our problems for us, that with a little genetic re-engineering here and a little biochemical manipulation there, a little help from our friends in the pharmaceutical industry, a little more social planning in this or that direction, a

few more hi-tech military toys, or the right mix of investments in our portfolios will lead us to the Promised Land of immortality and total security. These are the siren voices we hear every day.

So how should we live in the face of the fearful threats of our age? Where, in the midst of global apocalyptic events or even our own personal apocalypses—those traumatic and deeply painful losses we all suffer—do we turn to find the courage and the hope and the wisdom to discern the signs, not of the beginning of the End, but the end of the beginning, signs of new life struggling to be born?

In addition to Jesus’ warnings about not mistaking the end of the beginning for the beginning of the End, our epistle lesson also offers us a practical program to help us keep our heads. Jesus, the author tells us, has already opened the new and living way to God for us. God’s judgment and verdict on the world has already been rendered in the death and resurrection of Christ. In Christ, we see that God’s goal for the world is not destruction, but redemption.

In view of this reality, he says, *“let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as some have done, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

Hold fast, provoke one another to love and good deeds, meet together to encourage one another. Hardly an earth-shattering program, is it? Hardly the counsel we might expect in the midst of Apocalypse Now.

And yet, there it is. As breathtakingly simple as that. Hold fast the confession of our hope. On what is that hope to be grounded? On human programs and problem-solving ability or our faith in the innate good sense of human beings to steer our way clear of abominable and terminal evils? Would you trust the judgment of any single

political leader of any nation or even the U.N. Security Council's for that matter? As important as the political process is, I'm afraid it's not a sufficient anchor for our faith and hope. No, our hope is grounded by our trust in the faithfulness of God. Jesus died, trusting in God's faithfulness, when all outward appearances, and even his inner feelings, pointed to God's abandonment and silence. Yet God vindicated that trust, and from the reality of death, brought forth new life. Hope springs from trust or faith, for that's what faith is—trust. We have to decide in whom or what we will trust. To have faith means to place our trust in the God whom St. Paul describes as the one "*who gives life to the dead and who calls into being things which do not exist.*"

How do we find such faith that kindles hope? *We hold fast the confession of our hope by provoking one another to love and good works.* Isn't that a remarkable expression? Provoking one another to love? Sometimes we do need to be provoked to love, don't we. We need the prodding and the nudging of others to jolt us out of our self-centeredness and our apathy. And yet, do any of us doubt that when we love, or when we see love in someone else, we are catching a glimpse of God's ultimate goal for the whole creation? Reinhold Niebuhr summarized this practical program as well as anyone has, I suspect. *Nothing worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing that is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing that we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.*¹

Niebuhr saw truly that this provoking to love is something that can only happen in community. That's why the writer of *Hebrews* urges his readers not to neglect to meet together to encourage one another. That's what going to church is really about. That's why I go to church, not because I'm the pastor or am particularly

religious. Pastors are often less religious than most other people. No, I come because I need to be provoked to love and good works. I need to be encouraged by others who have found a way or are struggling to find a way to hold fast to hope in the midst of evil times. Here I get in touch with those sources from which spring faith and hope and love. Here I gain perspective on the events of the world in which I live, and learn that they signal not the beginning of the End, but the end of the beginning, the birthpangs. And so my hope is kindled. And when we're together, encouraging one another in this way, we are, as Paul Tillich once put it, a sign to the world around us once put it, "that here and there in the world, and now and then in ourselves, is a new creation."²

1. Reinhold Niebuhr. *Justice and Mercy.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

2. Paul Tillich, *The New Being,* New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1955, p. 18.