

Thus Passes the Glory of the World

24th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 28, Year B. November 15, 2009. (Text: Mark 13:1-8)

The latest trend in Hollywood is end-of-the world movies. Have you seen the trailers for “2012”? Pretty fantastic special effects! ...Huge tsunamis smashing down skyscrapers. ...Little airplanes flying up out of collapsing canyons. ...Massive earthquakes causing freeways to fall down. St. Peter’s basilica in Rome toppling. The White House in flames. —Wow. If you go for disaster flicks, you won’t want to miss this one. It’s on at the Isis right now. There are shows at 1:10, 4:00, and 8:00. (You just have time to grab lunch after church and make it to the early one.)

This particular end-of-the-world movie, in case there’s anybody here who hasn’t already heard the story, is based on the premise that the ancient Mayan “long count” calendar, which comes to an end in December of our year 2012, is an accurate prediction of the future. If those ancient Mayan calendar makers knew what they were talking about, the earth is going to dissolve in exactly three years. (If that’s true, I might as well live with my old PC and not switch to a Mac.)

Of course, since the Mayan calendar didn’t say anything about the destruction of their own civilization by the Spanish in the 16th century, it’s unlikely that their fantasies about future cataclysms have any value at all. —But they do provide profitable ideas for the movie industry, and “2012” is probably going to make a ton of money. So buy some stock in Sony Pictures tomorrow.

The sad thing is that there are lots of people who really believe this stuff. They are the same people who were sure that all the computers in the world were going to be fried when the year 2000 came around, and planes would be crashing everywhere on New Year’s Day. (Remember all the “Y2K” chatter?) These are the same *kind* of people who – a millennium earlier – believed that the world was going to come to an end in the year 1000, because that’s how they understood the Book of Revelation.

I think we just enjoy scaring ourselves. A little *frisson* of terror adds some excitement to an otherwise dull November. —“*The world is coming to an end!*” “*We are all going to die!*” What if....!?

Of course, we *are* all going to die, aren’t we? Death is a certainty, a reality of all human experience. We need to be prepared for it. Also, sooner or later, the world as we know it *is* going to come to an end. — But I don’t think it’s going to be during the pre-Christmas sales three years from now. The ancient Mayans had no miraculous knowledge of the future.

The gospel this morning tells about Jesus touring Herod’s vast and glorious Temple with his disciples, not long before he went to the cross. Rural folks from Galilee were amazed at the awesome dimensions of the Temple every time they saw it. It never failed to impress them. And with good reason! If you go to Jerusalem today and just look at the foundation stones that are still in place you’ll be impressed too. They’re colossal. Each one weighs forty tons. Imagine what the actual Temple built way up on top must have looked like! Herod was building for eternity. —Or so he thought.

Jesus said to his disciples, “*Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down.*” And he was right. The Romans destroyed the Temple forty years later. It had barely been finished before it was demolished.

There is wisdom for you and me in this gospel. And it’s more than just a corrective to contemporary apocalypticism, more than an antidote to the prophecies of the doom-watchers and the fear-mongers who

see the end of the world right around the corner and want us to join them in their anxiety. Jesus told his disciples, *“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.”* There will always be people – sometimes sincere people – who are ready to lead us astray. And there will be unscrupulous people ready to make some kind of profit from making us anxious about what is coming tomorrow – or three years from now.

The first piece of wisdom for us in this gospel is simple and clear: Do not expect that we human beings are ever going to build a temple, or a cathedral, or a nation, or a city, or a society, or a business that will endure forever. In this mortal universe, sooner or later everything comes to an end. The Roman Empire lasted a very long time. But it's gone now. It's history.

At every papal coronation until 1963, as a newly chosen pope proceeded from the sacristy of St. Peter's Basilica, carried on a portable throne on the shoulders of Roman noblemen, the procession would stop three times and a priest would fall to his knees before the pope, holding a piece of smoldering rope. Each time, as the rope burned away, the priest would say in Latin in a loud and mournful voice: "Holy Father, thus passes the glory of the world!" *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Everything goes back to the dust – all our mortal glory and our monuments – and something else rises up from the dust. Sure, you can go to Egypt and visit the pyramids and to China and see the Great Wall. You can go to England and walk around Stonehenge. But those are relics of a dead past. Ancient history.

We just finished this beautiful new church, and we like it a lot. But I don't think any of us imagines that this building is going to be here forever. It might last fifty years, maybe seventy-five. Who knows? But I know this: one day it will be gone. That's life. Death is a fact of life. —But, joyfully, so is birth!

In today's gospel, despite his warning that there will be wars and rumors of wars, as well as earthquakes and famines, Jesus leaves his disciples (and us) with a final word of hope. A seed of better things to come. This is the second piece of wisdom for us in today's gospel. Jesus says: *“This is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.”*

We all know—and women who have given birth know better than men do—that the pains during childbirth are a sign of hope, because *through* all that pain a new baby is born. And that new life is always a sign of hope. Birth pains are worth it, because they result in a new human being.

No person, no nation, no society, no church can build an eternal monument for itself. All our “temples” will be thrown down, just like Herod's was. But we can trust the promise of God and the power of God's Spirit to bring us a new and enduring life, through whatever pains we might be called to undergo. I think that's some of what Jesus meant when he told the disciples and the crowds that unless they became like little children, even newborn babes, they could not enter the Kingdom of God. He told Nicodemus, *“You must be born from above.”* And there is no new birth, no new life without “birth-pangs.”

We can't build an eternal monument in this world. But we *can*, through the love of God and the life-giving power of God's Spirit, begin a new relationship with God, a new life, a life of faith. As it says on the sign-board out front this morning: “Faith is the first proof of love.” We can begin that new life of love and faith today. —And it's a life that no earthly disaster and no scare-mongering, doom-saying moviemakers, preachers, scientists, politicians, or economists can take from us! That new life is safe in God's hands. Always.

