

“The Beginning of the End?”
November 15, 2009
Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton
Westhampton Congregational Church, UCC

It was one of those moments. The kind where you take a mental picture. The sort of moment when you remember *exactly* where you were and *exactly* what you were doing. We had all heard the grim news, and for awhile by then. Everyone had, all over the world. It was just a matter of waiting. It was just a matter of running down the clock. It was inevitable.

There were going to be power outages. Planes might fall out of the sky. There would be all sorts of rioting in the big cities. Because nothing would run like it was made to anymore. International communication would be disrupted. Whole records of people, and property, and bank accounts would be wiped out in the ticking of one second to the next.

And so I watched in morbid fascination. I watched in a mix of hope and fear. Bundled in a down comforter on the overstuffed couch in the TV room of my Montpelier, Vermont home I watched as the last few seconds of 1999 were counted down and we all made our way into Y2K and into the unavoidable computer crisis that was the beginning of the end of the life we all knew.

But we didn't go there, did we? Even though all sorts of so-called experts—and a handful of cranks, too, of course—assured us that we would. Some committed individuals focused their efforts, we found a way around the looming crisis, and life goes on.

Other would be doomsdays have passed since Y2K, too. May fifth, 2000 was supposed to bring another Ice Age according to Richard Noone.¹ In Ronald Weinland's book *2008: God's Final Witness*, it was predicted that hundreds of millions of people will die, and that the United States will cease to be by...well, a little over a year ago now.

Looking into the past: who remembers the Heaven's Gate cult which decided to spiritually board an alien space craft they were certain was riding in the tail of the Hale Bopp comet? *That* was to avoid a doomsday. One time perennial presidential candidate, and *700 Club* televangelist, Pat Robertson stated unequivocally that the world would receive its final judgment by God no later than 1982. Oops. Halley's Comet was feared to pour deadly cyanide-like gas over Earth when we passed through its tail in 1910. Again—not so much. William Miller predicted a range of

¹ http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33622934/ns/technology_and_science-science/?pg=11#Tech_Doomsday for all these various doomsday scenarios.

possible dates for the end of the world between 1843 and 1844, which led ultimately to the formation of the Seventh Day Adventist after each date passed.

And those are just some of the doomsdays which have been predicted in the last couple of centuries. In fact, we have been predicting the end of time since the beginning of time. Norse mythology imagines a time when even immortal gods fall in the doomsday known as Ragnarok. Our own Christian tradition is often understood to speak of the End Times in which life as we know it will cease. And of course, the Mayan civilization assigned a final date in their calendar: December 21, 2012. Could this be the next doomsday, maybe the real one?

There is even a movie about it. Have you seen the ads? Massive earthquakes ripple earth in waves. Hundreds of cars are swallowed up. The oceans overflow their banks and drown the tallest of mountains. Well known monuments and buildings crumble to dust. Not one stone is left upon another—they are all thrown down. It is the ultimate disaster movie. My bet is that the movie will do incredibly well. There seems to be something in human beings which craves a doomsday. There seems to be something in us which longs to confirm our worst suspicions and expectations.

And our brother and Savior Jesus seems to be going right along with that impulse in today's reading. Or, at least, that is the usual interpretation of today's passage. It is the first part of a longer section which is called an eschatological discourse. "Eschatological discourse" is a fancy theological term for a talk about the so-called end times. In the writing that lies beyond this morning's reading that does seem to be the gist of the passage. However, this morning's part of the passage can be seen to deliver another message entirely.

Jesus tells us that there will be "wars and rumors of wars," that "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom," and, furthermore, there will be "earthquakes in various places," and "famines."² When we hear those words, they sound like they could be straight out of the ads for that 2012 movie. It sounds rough, frightening and even potentially fatal. It makes a certain sense to think of the passage in terms of a doomsday. We can understand why the Disciples would want to know when these things would happen. We all want to be able to prepare for any potential trouble, right?

But Jesus doesn't *only* utter dire warnings here. Tucked in and around predictions of war, national upheaval, earthquakes and famine are smaller yet more powerful words: "do not be alarmed, this must take place, the end is still to come."³ In other words, "do *not* fear, these things do happen, and they *do not* predict the end." These things: war, national upheaval, earthquakes and famine are around us all *right now*. We are knee deep in two armed conflicts in

² Mark 13:7-8, edited.

³ Mark 13:7, edited.

foreign lands. We are facing economic woes which are worse than they have been for the better part of a century. Tsunami and landslides rock the world, and many, many poor people are in need of enough to eat.

And all these things happen all the time. If it is not here in our country, it is somewhere else. They happen now, they happened in the near and distant past and they happen *always*. There have been wars and rumors of war, kingdoms and nations have clashed, and people have known famine and natural disasters *always*. Jesus calls these things “birthpangs” of the new age he seeks to bring about. They are not the end of days—not annihilation and doom—but they *do* offer us the potential to transition to new days. Every disaster or struggle Jesus outlines is something which we can have a hand in making better.

Each of us can respond to suffering with compassion. When all the poor are fed and famine ceases to be possible because people share with one another—those are days worth having! When all those who are rocked by earthquakes are nursed back to health, and the H1N1 vaccine is distributed equally among all those in need instead of being hoarded by rich leaders of industry—those are good days indeed! When the struggles between kingdoms and countries cease because the seeds of Peace which Jesus sowed have been reaped—those are days worth living into!

In those days, life as we have known it does indeed end, because we will finally manifest the realm of Heaven in the here and now. What ends in the end times is our self-centeredness that keeps us from helping one another. The way out of doomsday is committed Discipleship.

Now friends, I do not mean to be a Pollyanna about this. We are indeed in trying times now. We face possibly dire challenges as human beings at this point in our history. Not least among them is the condition of the planet’s climate. A number of environmentally conscious people are asserting that unless we act boldly, decisively and quickly that our planet may not support life as we know it within three generations. If we do not act we could bring about Doomsday indeed. But again, the way out of doomsday is committed discipleship. Just as when the threat of Y2K loomed, committed individuals got busy and fixed the computer code problem, we are able to subvert this potential catastrophe, too. We are called to offer compassion to one another *and* to the world which was given to us as a garden. After all, our sacred stories remind us that we were made to tend the garden which ultimately *belongs* to God.

And friends, there is good news indeed: no matter what we face, Jesus is with us. Jesus is with us in the face of tumult saying “do *not* be alarmed.” Jesus is with us in the face of every challenge saying “I am with you always!”⁴ With God on our side there is no challenge we cannot overcome. Through committing ourselves to Discipleship we can avoid any doomsday

⁴ Matthew 28:20.

and bring ourselves closer to the time when Heaven and earth meet here among us, around us and through us. May it be so, Amen.

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!” 2Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

3When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” 5Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. 6Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. 7When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8For 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.