

Pent 25, Proper 28, Year B
11-15-15
All Saints Church

Well, here we are winding down the church year. Next Sunday is the last Sunday in our liturgical year. After that, we begin again with Advent, using the lectionary readings for Year C. As is usual for this end-of-the-year time, the readings for this Sunday are about the end-times of the world as we know it. All of the readings today use apocalyptic language, the language of the end-times, which is marked by symbolic images, the expectation of the end of the world and some sort of cosmic battle in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil.

This sort of language has been around forever, although we in the Episcopal Church have not been the sort to dwell on this fantastical kind of event. But it is not altogether unknown to us, if you think about it. Remember a few years back when Harold Camping, a California-based so-called Christian radio broadcaster, declared that Jesus' return was imminent? He went so far as to predict an actual date, based on Biblical "proofs" that he had gleaned from the Bible, although he had to revise the date a few times.

Others believed the Mayan calendar's supposed contention that the world would end on Dec. 21, 2012.

I have a friend who, at the December 1999 meeting of a group we were both in, declared that she wouldn't see us again, because she believed that the coming of Y2K was the coming of the Rapture - and she fully intended to be 'taken up'!

So it seems that we really might be more familiar with the apocalyptic worldview than we might think. And that brings up the question: what drives some people to try to look into the future and describe the end of history? I think it is because we think if we can know the future, it will shed some light on the problems we are facing now, and even give us a bit of relief from those problems.

If that is the case, then, we must look at today's lesson as one that is NOT supposed to give us a hint about the exact timeline for Jesus' return and the end of world, but as something to help us frame and interpret some of the challenges that Jesus' followers were facing. These challenges might have included disappointment at Jesus' delayed return, the huge social and religious upheaval caused by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70A.D. (about the same time

that Mark's Gospel was written), confusion among Jesus' followers about whether they had missed his second coming, and conflicts between rival Christian leaders.

In short, life was a bit of a mess for many of the folks in Mark's community, so he uses the words and the symbols of the apocalyptic traditions about Jesus to put the struggles of his community in a cosmic context, as it were. In this way, he offers them both perspective and comfort.

In our own time, we have many struggles as well: there are memories of wars, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, the assassinations of world leaders, economic struggle, more wars, disease epidemics, and continuing violence in our society and around the world. We worry about the safety of our children, about terrorists, about suicide bombers, and about what we can put in our carry-on luggage when we go on vacation. Given the terror of what just happened in Paris, we may wonder where God is in all of this. Are we in the end-times?

We mustn't let ourselves get overwhelmed by feeling that the cosmic nature of our struggles cannot be overcome. Instead, let's look at how we might interpret these struggles in light of the Gospel. When the disciples ask Jesus for the details and signs of the coming destruction, Jesus tells them that they must not be led astray. "Beware... Many will come in my name...and they will lead many astray." Can we look at what things are trying to lead us astray?

Maybe it's the enticement of wealth or possessions. Maybe it's the possibility of a more prominent, high-status job, or the possibility of acceptance at a prestigious school, or by a social group. Maybe it's the dream of a perfect relationship. Maybe it's the dream of being recognized as one who is talented and competent. Maybe it is our need to provide our children with everything we never had, but wanted. The list could go on and on.

While these things might sound diverse, they all have one thing in common: there is nothing inherently wrong in any of them! Not in wealth or status or belonging or relationship or competency or wanting the best for our children. In fact, these desires really have much in them to be desired, and much good can be achieved through them.

Not one of those things can save us, however.

But what we do is take these gifts from God and turn them in to, well, God - which is, perhaps, the human condition - worshiping the gifts rather than the giver. So, in times of distress and challenge and confusion, we are not only overly impressed by the symbols of power we see - "Teacher, look how big these stones are!" - but we also try to find the security we are looking for in the good things in our lives instead of in the One who gave us those good things in the first place.

Living with uncertainty was hard for the first-century followers of Jesus and it's just as hard for those of us in the twenty-first century as well. The promise God offers us in Christ, however, is not that if we just work hard enough, or are pious enough, or make ourselves acceptable enough, or achieve enough, we'll leave all our uncertainties and insecurities behind. In fact, the Christian faith does not offer us an end to uncertainty or insecurity at all.

What faith does promise us is that we can discover *who* we are only in relation to *whose* we are - we receive our identity as beloved children of the God who creates and sustains all things and loves us unconditionally. The antidote to uncertainty, it turns out, isn't certainty, but courage; and the best response to insecurity is the confidence that comes from knowing that God regards us as worthy of dignity, honor, and love. Grounded in these promises, we are better able to resist all those false prophets and give our allegiance to the One who gave all things for us. Let us have hope and courage, because, in the end, God will reign. Thanks to be to God.