

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Daniel 12:1-3

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18

Mark 13:24-32

Once again, we are well into the season of autumn. Once again, the days are getting shorter, and the sun is heading south (which some of us would love to do). And—once again we're hearing about the end of the world.

Our Scripture passages today are filled with vivid images: Michael the archangel as guardian of the Jewish people; Jesus, seated at the right hand of God; stars falling from the sky; the Son of Man coming in the clouds.

Some of these images are frightening. It's been gloomy enough around here in recent days. What if the sun and the moon were to disappear forever? Is this darkness meant to remind us of the darkness of human sin?

But some of the images are breath-taking: the wise ones shining like stars in the night sky. The good that we do is not for nothing. The good that we do will not be lost.

Today's gospel reading is part of the Little Apocalypse found in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is speaking to his disciples in Jerusalem. His public ministry will soon be over. There is still so much that he wants to tell them. Their lives in his service will not be easy. They will be arrested, beaten, betrayed. The Temple itself will be destroyed.

But they will not face these challenges alone. The Spirit will be with them. And the end will not be the end but, in fact, a new beginning. Jesus will return.

The disciples are to wait in hope. So are we. They are to be vigilant. So are we.

As long as Christians have understood that Jesus will return and the world will be transformed, a few of us have tried to calculate the exact moment of the Second Coming. Many formulas have been used.

When the Billy Graham Crusade came to Rochester at the end of the '80's. I served on a committee for outreach to youth. Most of the members of the committee came from evangelical churches. At one of their churches, a couple announced that they had calculated the time of Jesus' second coming, and it would be very soon. They were warning church members about this, and the staff was following them around, putting out the fires they had set. The exact moment would come during one of our committee meetings, and we were in a room with no windows. The meeting went on and on, and nothing happened. No one disappeared. When we had finished and were preparing to

leave, someone wondered how we'd feel if we found the streets deserted. Everyone laughed nervously.

On a more serious note, lots of European Christians were terrified as the year 1000 approached. Wasn't the Church meant to last for only a thousand years? Didn't the Book of Revelation say that the devil would be locked up for that length of time and then let loose for a little while? But the millennial year came and went, and life went on. Less than a century later the crusades began.

European Christians of the 14th century should be forgiven if they thought the world was coming to an end. The Black Death took as many as three fourths of them in some regions. But enough survived to carry on, and from them came the Renaissance.

The concept of the rapture embraced by many Evangelicals today came into being in the 19th century. When Israel was re-established in 1948, they saw this event as proof we were in the end times.

Then there was the year 2000. Remember? Even if we didn't think Jesus would return at that point, there was plenty of worry and fear about the computers' going down. One couple at the party I was at left before midnight. They wanted to be home when everything fell apart.

As century after century passed and the world was not destroyed, some people became skeptical and mocking. Yet the Church does teach that life as we know it will not continue indefinitely. There is the matter of our own deaths and what meaning they might have. And there is the fact that with today's technology, we can do enormous harm to ourselves and to the planet. And there remains the promise that Christ will return and make all things new.

The end times are already here. Some of Jesus' contemporaries did believe in a resurrection from the dead. But they thought it would come in the far distant future. Jesus' resurrection, therefore, was a signal to his Jewish followers that this glorious future, promised by Daniel, had already begun.

And Christians have seen Jesus as God's word incarnate, God's word in the flesh. So when he promised his friends that even if creation as they knew it passed away, his words would not, it was another way of saying that he was eternal and would always be with us.

We do not know what our future will bring. Like the past, it probably will be filled with great joys and great sorrows. But we are called to live in hope. For the end of the world will bring us not death, but life.