

November 15, 2009

Scripture: Mark 13: 1-8

Sermon: "Looking for Signs"

It has been a week. I think every time I turned on the news this week, there was a new disaster. From the shooting at Fort Hood, to a man taking out his anger on fellow co-workers in Florida, to the winds and rain of Hurricane Ida flooding areas, disasters filled our TV screens, our newspapers, and seemingly our every waking thought this past week.

And surrounding these disasters, are the shouts and perceived tell-tale signs proclaiming that the world is coming to an end. Because really how bad is it going to get? It is easy to see why people are thinking the world is coming to an end. We live in a scary time. It seems like guns are the only way to solve issues with each other and with other nations. And the very Earth that we live on is erupting in fires, earthquakes, and hurricanes.

That's the news of our day: disasters, killings, wars, violence. And well, who can blame us, ordinary, everyday kind of folks, from wondering: Really, how bad are things going to get? Surely, the world is coming to an end. It just can't go on like this much longer.

It seems like all the signs are pointing to the end of the world. Why, just a few days ago, a few of us Keenagers were driving through Liberty, KY and we saw a man walking down the street with a sign that warned people that the end was coming to an end...in November! And then the questions naturally came: Well, when in November? November is a long month. And then someone said, "Well, at least he didn't say what year, so he can use his sign over and over again."

It seems like all the signs are predicting the end of the world: earthquakes, wars, famines, just to name a few things. How much longer can things go on? Our foundations are shaking and crumbling underneath our feet. All signs seem to be predicting the end of the world....again. If there is one thing about humanity, it is that we are consistent. Throughout the ages, people have tried to predict the end of the world. When worlds and cultures change, people proclaim that it is the end of the world. People begin looking for signs for the end of the world. People begin reading the stars. People interpret the natural disasters to be it. Just take a few minutes and think about...how many times in your lifetime have you heard the world is coming to an end on such and such day?

Throughout history, there has always been a one group or another predicting that the world is going to come to an end on a specific time. Why just last year, a book was released that the world would come to an end in the fall of 2008. Yet we find ourselves making our way through the fall of 2009.

Throughout history, people have read the signs and have said that the world is coming to an end...again, again, and again. People have heard about disasters and have wondered how much longer can things go on they are...again, again and again.

Throughout history, people have set a date for the end of the world and have tried to prepare for it, collecting supplies, stock-piling water and food, waiting for the end. Because things look bad. Because people are frightened. Because everything they knew and trusted is falling apart.

And that is the situation that we find the community that Mark is writing to today. His community has watched the Temple fall. His community has watched families being torn apart and persecutions are steadily growing against the members of his community. And they are wondering how long...How long can this go on? They are frightened. Things look bad. And because everything they know and trust is fall apart. And so Mark tells them this story.

Jesus and his disciples have been in Jerusalem all week and they have spent most of their time at the Temple. This group has seen Jesus flip tables over, scattering money everywhere. This group has heard Jesus challenge their understanding of giving. And now as they are walking out the back door of the Temple, one of them makes a casual remark about how impressive the actual Temple building is and how large the stones are that are supporting the Temple. And in response Jesus starts talking about how the Temple will one day be gone and that no one single stone will be left standing.

And you can imagine the disciples' responses: "What do you mean? Jesus, I think you've got it wrong. Nothing is going to destroy the Temple. It is so big. It is so secure. It's God's House. Jesus, what do you mean that one day, the Temple won't be standing here anymore? It's the Temple. It's secure. It's the Temple.

And like any good teacher, Jesus takes this moment as a teaching moment.

"Look, it's going to happen, and there is nothing you can do to prevent the Temple from coming down. No one knows when. No one knows how. It's just going to happen because the Temple is not permanent. It is just a building. It is just a structure. Sure, we feel the presence of God there but that's not the only place where we feel the presence of God. Do you think if the Temple is not there then God will no longer be there? It doesn't work that way. God doesn't work that way. God remains. When everything else has crumbled or fallen down or has become worn down by the hands of time, one thing remains: God. Put your trust in God. Don't worry about the signs that will predict the end. All they do is create an atmosphere of fear and worry. All they do is create chaos. All they do is distract people from their calling: to live out the principles of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Sure the Temple and yes, even the earth will come to an end one day because all these things are not permanent. They are of this world, not the Kingdom of God. If you live your life constantly worrying about the end, and constantly live your life in fear, you miss out on the work that God calls you to do here on earth. And that is to love your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

That is what Jesus is trying to get the disciples to remember as he prepares for the journey ahead that will lead him to the cross. Jesus wants them to put their whole trust in God and God's promises because those are the only things that are permanent and will remain for all time. He doesn't want them to always live in fear.

Jesus wants the disciples to understand that will always going to be a group of people who says the end of the world is coming. They'll say that there are wars, earthquakes, famines, all sorts of things that will be signs that the end is near. They'll say that they are Jesus come back again. Don't listen to them. And all they'll do is frighten the people. They'll have people scurrying around like ants, trying their best to prepare for the end because they are afraid, afraid of the unknown, afraid of not being in control, afraid of what they see as an end.

And that is not the life that God intends for God's children to live out here on earth.

Jesus wants the disciples to understand that what this world sees as the end, they will see as a new beginning. They see that God is continuing to create something new and fresh. They see that God is staying true to God's promises that God's justice and peace will fill the earth. Jesus wants the disciples to know as people of faith that God is still working and is reshaping what seems to be an ending into a new beginning.

And that is the good news that Mark shares with his community and with us today. God is the only thing that we can put our whole trust into and know that God will always be there for us as God's people. All our buildings, all our plans, all our well-designed plans fade with the passage of time. Only God remains constant. Only God remains when all things fall away. Only God remains.

We are not called to a life of fear, always worrying about signs of the end times. Because if we remember Jesus said, no one knows when that will be, not even the angels. That's God's business, not ours. It's God's time, not ours.

All we need to concern ourselves with is loving God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength. All we need to concern ourselves with is loving our neighbor as ourselves. All we need to concern ourselves with is living out the principles of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

And if we really need a sign, all we have to do is look no further than the cross. The world saw it as an end. The world saw death. The world saw it as a sign of the end of Jesus and his ministry, a way of shutting up and shutting down this radical preacher and teacher.

Yet, we as people of faith, see it as a sign of new beginnings, of new life, of a new creation. Every time we look at the cross, we know that God is still working in the world, re-creating, renewing, and refreshing. Every time we look at the cross, that God is staying true to God's promises that God's justice and peace will fill the earth. Every time we look at the cross, we know know as people of faith that God is still working and is reshaping what seems to be an ending into a new beginning.

And that is the sign of our times: The cross. What was an ending is a new beginning. A sign for all time.

The cross: the sign that all people of faith look for and towards to give them hope, to give them peace, and to be assured of God's grace.

If you need a sign for the end of times, look no farther than the cross.

May we always put our trust and faith in God, no matter the signs that this world is showing us. Amen.

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