

Proper 28, Year B  
Mark 13:1-8  
November 14, 2021  
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian  
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### “Little Apocalypses Everywhere”

Nearly every Sunday, today included, we recite the Apostle’s Creed, as our affirmation of faith. The words of this creed have meant slightly different thing to me over the years and depending on where I am in my own Spiritual journey, but the one line that I perhaps have the most difficulty boldly proclaiming, not because I don’t believe it, but because I am not always sure what it means is “I believe he (Jesus) will come again to judge the quick (or the living) and the dead.” The apocalypse, or the End Times, or Christ’s Second Coming is not among my favorite theological topics to preach, teach, or reflect on. It’s just not a central part of my theology and spirituality, at least in the ways that that it is often taught and meant by many Christians. If you ask me about dispensationalism, or if I’m pre or post millennial, I’m going to have to go back to my systematic theology class notes to even begin to define those terms. Perhaps one of the big reason is that while I was growing up in the Bible Belt, preaching on the End Times, or Christ’s Second Coming was a very popular subject for many of the evangelical churches I was surrounded by. While I was busy devouring the Harry Potter series in Middle School, many of my friends, who were forbidden to read such fantastical nonsense, were equally enthralled in the Left Behind series. You couldn’t drive down the street without passing a number of church marquees advertising a sermon series, a Sunday School class, or revival touting the latest in the interpretation of signs regarding the End Times.

Engaging in prophecies and predictions about the apocalyptic events of the end of the world is nothing new. From the prophets of the Old Testament to the disciples in the early church, to medieval Popes and frontier preachers, to the televangelists and mega church super stars, people of faith have always viewed the events of the world around them through the lens of God's activity and ultimate sovereignty over creation. Not surprisingly in times of great change, conflict, and upheaval, religious fervor around Christ's Second Coming gains traction and overly zealous preachers who are not wise enough to keep their predictions broad and vague may find themselves digging a hole they can't climb out of. William Miller, a Baptist preacher, whose movement during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening would go on to form Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventist, found this out the hard way. A farmer who was "born again" began to read and be inspired by the book of Daniel and from the writings of that text he concluded that world will end on October 22, 1844. Having gained quite the following through his revivals, many in the northeastern United States were likewise convinced that Jesus would be returning in glory. It is reported that as many as 100,000 folks closed up their shops, left their homes and jobs some even for good, and gathered in churches, fields, and meadows, waiting for Christ to come. A man named Henry Emmons, who was a follower of Miller, later wrote, "I waited all Tuesday [October 22] and dear Jesus did not come;—I waited all the forenoon of Wednesday, and was well in body as I ever was, but after 12 o'clock I began to feel faint, and before dark I needed someone to help me up to my chamber, as my natural strength was leaving me very fast, and I lay prostrate for 2 days without any pain—sick with disappointment." Many people felt as deeply as Henry on that day, some never recovered the

same faith they once had, certainly Miller himself lost a large portion of his flock, in an event that came to be known in American history as the “The Great Disappointment.”<sup>i</sup>

Despite setbacks by would be prophets and future casters like Miller, the allure of reading the signs and making predictions about who or what will bring about the ultimate end of the world and unleash God’s wrath and judgement continues to hold us captive. Over the centuries countless figureheads and leaders have been named the “anti-Christ” from Emperor Nero in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, to the reformer Martin Luther, to Hitler and Mussolini, to the more controversial pick of Ronald Regan. There are many facets of the Second Coming that capture and intrigue us. Intertwined with our ideas of the apocalypse is also our desire for control and to not be one of those suckers who was caught unprepared. There is also a strong sense of justice wrapped up in Christ’s coming, that those who do evil, who cause pain and suffer will get theirs and they will in turn be the ones who suffer. Of course, it’s always them and they who gets their just desserts, we however will be counting on God’s grace. And then there is perhaps the most important reason we as humans return again and again to this apocalyptic literature and these themes, and that is because in midst of disasters, both natural and of our own making, of kingdoms rising and falling, of worlds destroyed and tumbling down, it is essential that we are reminded of who ultimately has the final say in history. We’ve always been in need of that comfort and hope of knowing that as bad as things are, this is not actually the end, and that God is at work for our good, even in the darkest of circumstances.

It really shouldn’t be any wonder to us why so many Christians focus on Christ’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. Not only have these words been ones of strength for the community, but they come from Jesus himself. Jesus did teach and talk of such events – frequently, like this prophecy in

Mark known as the “little apocalypse.” Jesus himself was steeped in the Jewish apocalyptic traditions, which views the world and history as ultimately within God’s control and it is God’s power which will deliver humanity from the atrocities we inflict on ourselves. It was important to Jesus that his followers know that life will not be easy for them, but that they will never be alone, and a new future awaits them in the midst of their struggles.

The community to which Mark was writing his gospel saw the literal destruction of the Temple in an unsuccessful rebellion against the Romans, that massive, magnificent, large temple that Jesus said not a stone would be left standing. Jesus’ words would have hit particularly close to home. As Jesus talks of wars, rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes, he’s describing events that could be happening in almost any place in the world, at almost any time in history. So while these words do indeed apply to Mark’s 1<sup>st</sup> century audience, what about us? Well, I think we can pretty much check off all the boxes here – wars – check, rumors of wars – check, famines – check, let’s sub hurricanes for earthquakes in our context – and check.

You see, we live with little (and big) apocalypses all the time, we *always* have. What would it mean for us to understand Christ’s Second Coming is not just one singular event at the end of history, but that it could also be Christ showing up in the midst of our suffering, pain, the end of the world as we know it? What if our engagement with the Second Coming and apocalyptic literature was less about mapping out a road to the end and more about opening our awareness to Christ’s presence with us along the journey?

Jesus has two instructions to his disciples in this passage - keep watch and do not be afraid. But this is not such an easy thing to do, because we are afraid. We don’t want to get it

wrong like poor William Miller and be disappointed. But we can trust Jesus' words and hope without fear, keep watch without being afraid. So when the apocalypse comes – in geopolitical and social unrest, in the aftermath of a hurricane, in a fractured relationship with a family member, in a routine check-up that turns into a life altering diagnosis, in infertility and pregnancy loss, in the daily struggles of mental illness or any number of chronic illnesses, in being laid off, in a divorce, in the utter pain and darkness of losing our loved ones – we can be assured that just as we have been promised that Christ will show up at the end of time, Christ will also show up for us in those times too. So maybe today we can all be a little more emboldened as we recite the apostle's creed, and we say, I believe that Christ will come again, and again, and again...

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Disappointment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Disappointment)

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-61/american-adventism-great-disappointment.html>