

## **THIS IS THE END OF THE WORLD**

*SERMON FOR NOVEMBER 18<sup>TH</sup>, 2018*

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Let us pray... *May the words lifted here and the meditation of all the hearts who receive these words, be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

I'll be the first to admit, that biblical texts like our Gospel lesson for today are not my favorite. It's unsettling to hear such vivid imagery, and read lessons like this Gospel message in Mark 13, because it falls into the category of "Apocalyptic Texts"... Discussing the Apocalypse is rarely fun. But it hasn't always been that way.

The word apocalypse comes from the Greek word meaning "disclosure, appearing, and revealing." Apocalypse is a revelation. In fact the first words of the Book of Revelation are, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," or it could be translated, "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ." In this way, biblically speaking, Apocalypse is a good thing.

The former pastor of the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado, Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, described this genre of literatures like this: "*Originally... apocalyptic literature — the kind that was popular around the time of Jesus — existed not to scare the bejeezus out of children so they would be good boys and girls, but to proclaim a big, hope-filled idea: that dominant powers are not ultimate powers. Empires fall. Tyrants fade. Systems die. God is still around.*"<sup>1</sup>

However, in our modern culture, Apocalypse doesn't seem so friendly. Apocalypse has veered away from its biblical roots of being the final revealing of the glory of God in Jesus Christ, to mean the explosive and horrifying end of the world. Our modern culture seems obsessed with this idea. It's Chicken Little crying, "The Sky is Falling!" in the classic folk tale. It's modern television being obsessed with the "Zombie Apocalypse" with very popular TV shows like *The Walking Dead*. Hollywood is densely saturated with Apocalypse stories that involve asteroids, the Earth's core not spinning, the 2012 Mayan Calendar predicting the end of the world, and the list goes on and on. After 1945, the world was exposed to nuclear weaponry and the military principle of Mutually Assured Destruction saturated the world with fear of a Nuclear Apocalypse and earth becoming a charred wasteland. Even Christians jumped on the apocalypse bandwagon with the very popular series of books and movie *Left Behind*. There is a strange obsession with the end of the world in our culture...

With so much cultural focus on the world's understanding of an "apocalypse" there are many important ways in which this text could be approached. We could discuss this obsession with the end of the world in relation to Jesus' statements of false prophets. In our lesson Jesus says, "*Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.*" Jesus gives a stern warning of false prophets, those who will lead his people astray. We could ask ourselves how many times we were the false prophets of our own lives. How many times do we prophesy to ourselves that the world is ending because we've lost control? How many times do we lose our heads completely and prophesy to ourselves that the world is ending because of trivial things like whether a Starbucks Cup accurately and faithfully represents the true meaning of Christmas? How many times do we prophesy to ourselves that the world is ending because we had a bad day or week and ignore the blessings and privilege all around us? We could talk about our need, as Christians, to look past our own inconveniences and hear the voices of those truly afflicted. In this way, we could hear a message of trust and hope, a message that called us to be agents of the kingdom for those truly in need and look past our own insecurities.

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<sup>1</sup> "We're in the Midst of the Apocalypse. And That's a Good Thing." Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/03/14/were-in-the-midst-of-an-apocalypse-and-thats-a-good-thing/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.bc4709076c46](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/03/14/were-in-the-midst-of-an-apocalypse-and-thats-a-good-thing/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.bc4709076c46)

But all of this conversation imagines “the world ending” in some abstract metaphorical way. From little meltdowns to random inconvenience, all this every day apocalypse work seems so abstract and irrelevant. But perhaps we don’t need to look to the abstract to understand this. We see instances of hatred, intolerance, abused power, and violence every day that really seem mean the ending of the world, or at least the world as that person or group of people knew it to be.

In this midst of current national conversations around the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, that name sexual assault and harassment as all too common experiences for women and girls in our world, victims of these acts have forever lost the world they knew without trauma, shame, and pain. As violent acts and rhetoric are becoming more common against our Jewish neighbors, our Neighbors of Color, and our Immigrant neighbors, the world seems to be crashing down around these already marginalized communities. As our country continues to lead the world in gun-related deaths per year, and when global violence, terrorism, drug trade, arms races, and war continue to plague our news, it seems that our worldly definition of apocalypse might just be correct...

Jesus said, “*For 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.*” These stories in our news, and in our lives, are devastating. These stories in our news are scary and they aren’t just some abstract thought. We’ve **actually seen** “...nation... rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom”. We’ve watched “*earthquakes in various places,*” and seen stories of “*famines.*” According to Jesus, “*This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.*” Jesus delivers this message as he engages the topic of the end of the world.

In the wake of tragedy like this, we fall to faith. We come to this place to again hear the word that sets us free to be God’s people. We need hope to combat the fear that is spreading. Perhaps we turn to God’s word to make it ok, when the news in the world is convincing us that the world is ending. We pray, “God... Make it better.” *It is in faith that we can hear and proclaim the **truth** we find in scripture...* That **This IS the End of the World...<sup>2</sup>**

I’ll say it again. **THIS IS THE END OF THE WORLD.**

At least... it should be... it could be. Throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus shares the promise of the Kingdom of God. He shares the twofold promise of the Kingdom that is to come, and the Kingdom that is possible for *us* to reveal *in this world*. So it is in the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Mark’s Gospel that we hear this final apocalyptic message by Christ. He is nearing his Passion and death, and in this final appeal to his followers we hear Jesus’ words that “*nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom*”. Jesus tells us that this will happen, not that this should happen. As a world we have witnessed the pain of war, acts of terror, injustice and oppression, and felt the Godforsaken emptiness of it all. This is the way of the world, and we can be resigned to this reality. But out of all of this, Jesus says, “*This is but the **beginning** of the birthpangs.*”

Birth is painful, but birth produces something beautiful. Out of the pain of birth comes new life. In this passage, Jesus is telling us that there will be times of pain, but if we are willing to meet pain with our faith, then it is the beginning of new and abundant life. It is impossibly hard to look at the innumerable tragedies that scar our world as the beginning of God’s Kingdom, but it **can** be this way if we become agents of the Apocalypse—those who are willing to commit to the great revealing of God’s loving and redemptive way. Just as we find love and mercy in the Cross of Christ, we can find God’s way, even in the midst of the apocalypse. The hope of Christ is almost always found in some paradoxical way.

I said earlier, “***This is the end of the world***” and I mean that. This is the end of the world if we choose to make it so. Many brave and faithful leaders throughout history **have** chosen to make it so. One of those prophetic leaders was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. After the bombing death of four young black girls in

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<sup>2</sup> DO NOT READ ALOUD! *A Note to the Sermon Reader: This is meant to be a point of emphasis in the sermon. This is a point where I would hope the listener is looking for a dramatic change or a new direction. They won’t get one. Use emphasis on the bolded words, and pause to convey this point clearly. “This **IS** the end of the world”. Hopefully, it is an unexpected twist that will make this message memorable.*

Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, Dr. King said, “...we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.”<sup>3</sup>To understand systems of evil that produce evil acts in our world, we must uncover the dark shroud of mystery that covers evil. We must come to understand the systems that produce evil. Evil is not simply evil for evil’s sake. In order to face it, we must understand how it got that way. We must understand evil that’s been buried under the guise of gallant history and forgotten memory if we’re going to understand why it rears its head today. We must draw evil into the Light of God’s Apocalypse, into the great revealing where evil holds no power, and the love of God is known by all. If we, in faith, make it so, then this is indeed the *end of the world*.

The world will be what it will be—full of strife and war, injustice and intolerance, pain and suffering. We can either be resigned to this in fear, or rise in faith. As he proclaims the coming of his kingdom, Jesus gives us a way to say again and again, “This is the end of the world.” As *we* have known the gift of God’s grace, through the forgiveness of our sins even while we were still sinners, we have witnessed firsthand the apocalypse of our God. God’s way of love has been “apocalypted”—or revealed—in our lives! It was the end of the world for our way of death when we have been mired in sin, and God’s grace gives us a way to walk in everlasting life here and now. We know, through the experience of our own lives of faith, that God is near to those who suffer. God has met us in our suffering, and sends us to meet those who are suffering as well. Christ is there, and we are called to point to him in the midst of pain, and speak a word of grace that will usher in God’s Apocalypse—the revealing of God’s way in the midst of brokenness.

As a community of faith, we must come together to declare this old world over and usher in a new Kingdom. The foundation of *this* kingdom is love, hope, unity, compassion, and peace. The foundation of this kingdom is built of the ashes of war and the memory of oppression. From this foundation we cry “Never Again”. From this foundation we bind up the broken and speak peace to a world in tatters. From this foundation we see eye to eye with children of God from every nation, every language, and every religion. From this foundation, we can hold one another as one body, seeking the best in one another, not judging the lives of many from the actions of the few.

**This is the end of the world**, and this new Kingdom will stand on the firm foundation of the love of Christ. Welcome dear friends to the Apocalypse. Welcome to the reign of God. Welcome to the great revealing of God’s love found in the water of baptism, the proclamation of God’s word, and the meal of everlasting life. Receive this Apocalypse in joyful faith. This is the end of the world, as long as we make it so...

**Amen.**

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<sup>3</sup> “Eulogy for Martyred Children”, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1963. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/eulogy-martyred-children>