

Proper 28B – Wars and Rumors of Wars

Mark 13:1-8

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

As I read today's Gospel, two incidents from years ago stood out vividly in my memory. Each has had a powerful effect on my imagination and religious sensibility. The first took place when I was a teen – I believe I was 16 years old. My folks and I were still living in Canaan, but my mom had an aunt who lived in Florida; so we often went down there for the Christmas vacation from school to avoid at least *some* winter. Things got so bad one year, I recall, that when we returned my dad and I had to dig not a path but a tunnel to our door to get us back in. In my mind coconuts sure beat snow! Anyway, *that* particular trip, as we were driving we were listening to the evening news on the car radio. The newscaster was telling the story of a group in North Carolina that was expecting a visit from a flying saucer that would whisk them away from the earth moments before our planet was destroyed. They had sold everything and gone to a mountaintop to wait for the saucer, which they expected that night. As is often the case with a news item like that one, it was the last of the newscast. I vividly remember the way the newscaster ended his stint. "Good night," he said; "I'll be with you again tomorrow evening ---- I *hope!*"

I can't say that I truly believed that the end was coming that night, but there was just enough edge in the newscaster's voice that it made an impression that I still relate to these many years later. The aftermath of that incident, by the way, became the basis for the development of the sociological theory of "cognitive dissonance," which describes the behavior of people when they firmly hold to a belief that they *know* is incorrect – for example, that a saucer was coming but never arrived. They simply are not able to give their belief up but have to readjust it to account for the failure of the prediction to come through. It led to a classic book on the topic called *When Prophecy Fails*.

The other incident took place a few years later, when I was just a college student at the height of the cold war, in the era of sputnik and Francis Gary Powers and his downed U-2 airplane. I don't recall what the particular incident was that provoked a fit of nerves in us at the time, but there were certainly plenty of them in that "duck and cover" era. One evening I went to bed in my dorm room outside of Boston. In the middle of the night a strong thunderstorm developed and I woke to the clap of an enormous burst of thunder. Startled out of a deep sleep, at first I didn't realize that what I had heard was only thunder. In fact, it flashed through my mind that the Russians had dropped the bomb on Boston. I pulled my covers over my head and thought to myself, "What the heck, if I have to die anyway I might as well do it in the comfort of my own bed."

Incidents like these and their imagery are known by the term "apocalyptic." An apocalypse is the Greek word for a revelation – of something hidden. The members of the UFO cult believed that they knew something the rest of us did not. The sound of the thunder was for me a sign of something far more sinister than simply noise to awaken me. Generally, these revelations are about things connected to what is usually called the "end-times," the end of things as we know them here on Earth. Today's Gospel reading contains just such imagery – wars and rumors of wars; nation rising up

against nation; earthquakes; famines. That's just the beginning, leading up to the eventual return of the "Son of Man, returning in clouds with great power and glory" to "gather his elect." Scary sounding stuff – except that, frankly, it sounds like everyday to me. If there are those who want to say we're living in the last days, who am I to take issue with them? However, none of the signs spoken of are in any way unique to our time. I defy you to find me any time in the recorded history of the world when there were no nations rising up against other nations, or earthquakes or famines. Only a few years ago there were lots of predictions about the millennium heralding the end. You may remember the once enormously popular book of Hal Lindsey's back in the 70s, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, predicting the end. And I remember seeing a book on the shelves of a bookstore I liked to shop in at the time the title of which was *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Come in 1988*. The author, a former NASA engineer, had very carefully calculated from an assemblage of lines in the Bible that it would be on October 3rd of that year. When it didn't happen, in accord with the hypothesis of the theory of cognitive dissonance he returned to writing to show how he had miscalculated and sold even more copies of his new book. In case I have now lulled you into complacency by showing you all these failed predictions, perhaps I ought to tell you that there are new ones pending that you'll be hearing more about in the next few years, in which, apparently, the calendar of the Mayan civilization is supposed to have made a prediction about the end coming in the year 2012 as does at least one prediction based on a Chinese belief system. In fact, I've already been seeing ads on TV, and even a review in the Hartford Courant, for a new disaster movie called *2012*. All of these predictions may not reveal *anything* about the end of the world, but theologian Barbara Rossing reminds us that they may yet have a truly positive effect if we think of them primarily in terms of what they reveal not about the possible end-times but about *us* – about our attitudes and expectations.

So, the question really raised by today's Gospel reading, it seems to me, is not whether the world is going to end – we know that it is, one way or another – or when – but what we ought to be doing with the time we have been given while we are here. And, after all, isn't that what we ought to be concerned about? As much as we might be able to construct horrible scenarios of how terrible the end may be, either personally, or for our civilization as a whole, the religion that binds us together is not finally, much as it may be desired by some, about who gets snatched up in what has been termed the Rapture – a word, by the way, that is simply not found in the Bible – to spend eternity with Jesus, gloating about all the non-believers who will be tortured for eternity down there in Hell. Certainly, if you have any familiarity with them, that is the vision of the all too successful books in the *Left Behind* series of novels that generated the notion that when the Rapture comes we poor folks who don't have quite the right beliefs will need to be careful if we're driving, since the car in front of us may suddenly be without a driver, if *he* has the *correct* beliefs.

Immediately after the lines of today's Gospel Jesus warns the disciples that, when the events that he has just predicted have taken place, they will be subjected to beatings and persecution before he returns to gather them to himself. He does not, however, counsel them to hide out to avoid those beatings. Indeed, the lesson we ought to take away from this reading isn't that we should be afraid that the end is nigh, but that we should take

heart, because no matter the consequence of our discipleship – ridicule, imprisonment, or even death – with our baptism we became Christ’s own forever and the knowledge of that fact should be comfort indeed! You know, whether we live twenty years – or well over 100 – neither, in God’s time, is very long at all. I like to think that when we come before the Gates of Heaven how long we lived isn’t going to matter at all. Life is *not* an endurance race. It’s much more, I think, like an Olympic gymnastics competition, where what *really* matters are the style points. So let’s all of us look for ways this week where we can make a difference in the life of someone who needs our help, and see just how stylish we can be! Surely that’s what Jesus would have his disciples do, isn’t it?

AMEN