

As you know, lots of people are predicting the end of the world on December 21st. As Bible believing Christians we know that such a thing is impossible to predict. In fact the Bible makes it absolutely clear that anyone who claims to know the time of the world is automatically wrong because such a thing cannot be predicted. Nevertheless many Christians try. And were it to actually be predictable, here are some fictitious headlines that might appear:

USA Today: We're dead

The Wall Street Journal: Dow Jones plummets as world ends

National Enquirer: Evidence Will Be Permanently Lost in O.J. Case

Sports Illustrated: Game over!

Wired: The last new thing!

Discover Magazine: How will the extinction of all life as we know it affect the way we view the cosmos?

Cosmopolitan: How be a turn-on when you're dead

Rolling Stone: The Grateful Dead reunion tour

I said last week that I know that for many, if not all of us, the idea of the end of the world is not something we get all that fussed about - and that is a good thing, because it isn't. It isn't a big deal if you live by faith every day, which is what these texts are ultimately calling people to do.

And yet, we have this season of Advent which is all about preparing for the return of Jesus and we have Bible texts which talk about it. I want to look at our gospel reading for today, not because you need to learn new things from it in order to be prepared, but because lots of other people do use these texts for all sorts of ridiculous teachings. I'd like you to be able to understand what is really being said in them, and be able to respond when you're around people who cite them

Last week I was listening to the Family Life Network as I was driving in my car and a guy who's name I can't remember was talking about these texts on the Chapter and Verse program. He wasn't reading them from Luke as did today, but from the parallel texts in Mark. His interpretive techniques were basically circular, so he guaranteed the results he wanted to get before he even started. But I'm willing to allow the Bible to speak in many and various ways, and if you can effectively bring people to faith with a study technique that I don't agree with, well, I'll cringe but not get upset. But, he was making big theological claims based on mistranslations. If you translate the words from Greek so as to nudge them to say what you want to say rather than what they really say, then you've absolutely guaranteed you'll get the results you want. I get

upset when I hear our scriptural writings so distorted, and that distortion becomes the public concept of Christian teachings. If someone is going to look down on our faith, then fine. But I want them to do it based on accurate information!

Anyway, our gospel text itself. Right before Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple and the entire city of Jerusalem. Some people ask him, "When?" He gives an answer that is pretty easy to interpret. He says, "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its destruction has come near." As I said, not too hard to interpret that one. And he goes on to say that when you see that happening, what should you do? Flee - get out of town! This isn't rocket science!

Then he continues with what's in our gospel reading. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming in the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory."

Jesus is using stock imagery that was common for prophetic and end-of-time pronouncements of that day. How literally and seriously should we take these words? That could be a subject for much debate, but Jesus gives an answer that doesn't depend on how literally or allegorically we want to understand them. He says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." In other words, don't be afraid. If the whole world is turning to chaos and people are freaking out everywhere, don't let that bother you. You should be secure in your faith. You can stand up and act in confidence. If God does destroy the world through some calamitous process, you know that it is all in God's hands and you are safe.

I always think it's funny when people make survival plans for the destruction of the world - really? Exactly where are you going to go or what are you going to do? How is buying a generator going to help you if the whole planet is blown to pieces? No, Jesus says that the situation is in God's hands so you can always act in confidence.

The next parable is what gets a lot end-of-timers all worked up. He says, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near." Some people say, "You see, you see! Jesus has told us there will be things to watch for and you will know. You have to be ready for them."

And I say, consider what you're actually saying. If there are clues - or even obvious things - to watch for then what is faith really all about? Are you really saying that you can do whatever you want until you see the signs, and then you have to become extra faithful? Because that is basically the way you're interpreting this text.

Look at the broader context - it's in a teaching about constant faithfulness even when things appear to be delayed. Live faithfully every day. And as for the trees greening in summer, you've missed the whole point of what Jesus was saying. You probably know well that most of the end-of-time language talks about harvesting and gathering and separating the wheat

from the chaff. Harvest happens in late summer and early fall. The trees greening image is a springtime image. It does not fit into apocalyptic teaching. Yes, Jesus is saying these words in the context of apocalypse, but remember the whole theme is about being faithful always.

I think that this is another part of that theme. Jesus has come, he has brought God's kingdom near, and the world is greening with its presence. Jesus is saying - now is the springtime. Now the end is near. Now is the time to work. And that fits perfectly with the theme of his next sentence, "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

This pronouncement, which Jesus appears to have made several times, puts a lump into many people's throats - and perhaps it should. There is no point in denying that the authors of our New Testament thought Jesus would return in their lifetimes. You see that theme throughout the New Testament. It was not in their minds that God would let the world go on for a couple thousand more years. Today we look at the world and

easily believe that the world could exist for thousands more - or even billions more - years.

All of what Jesus said was believed to be coming true in the few short years ahead. Now, for our sake and for the sake of those who come after us, it is a good thing it didn't happen or else we would never have a chance to enjoy life. But we cannot be faithful to the New Testament and pretend otherwise.

So, what does Jesus mean when he says, "this generation will not pass away"? Many people of the time took him literally. Our gospel writer Luke probably understood it that way too. But when realize Jesus talked about "this generation" many times, you realize he was not talking about a specific group people for a number of years. He's talking about the old world - those people who stubbornly turn their backs on God's will. He's talking about the old ways of manipulation, trading favors, doing deals, and exploitation. You hear the frustration in his voice in Matthew 17:17 when he says, "You faithless and perverse generation, ...how much longer must I put up with you?"

Jesus seems to be saying that we shouldn't expect people to actually get better or be nicer somehow as time goes on. It won't happen.

On the whole, when it comes to the end of time, Jesus says stay faithful. The whole thing is in God's hands. It won't be easy - life on this planet never is. But live in confidence and surety every day for as many days as there are. Amen