

Tribulation And Glory

Mark 13:1-8, 19-27

November 18, 2012

I.

If we watch the popular movie "2012," we see that the world will end next month. According to some interpretations of the ancient Mayan calendar, this great apocalypse will occur on December 21, just thirty three days from today. Are we ready? Have we put our affairs in order?

And an interesting digression is that December 21 also is the day set aside each year on the church calendar to honor St. Thomas. Perhaps we should gather that day for one last big party.

But the real experts say we should not worry. According to them, December 21 merely is the last day of a cycle on the Mayan calendar that spans 5,125 years, and begins all over again the next day. That could mean that this issue doesn't arise again until the year 7137.

Wouldn't it be great if we really could know the future? What if we could know in advance what stock market will do next week, or even whether the Saints will defeat Oakland this afternoon?

But that's unrealistic because no one knows the future. All these writers, journalists, and television personalities who tell us what is coming don't really know. They're just giving their opinions, which all are different.

So, I guess we'll just have to muddle along, clueless and in the dark, being pulled here and there, not knowing what to expect or where to go for guidance. Perhaps the history and future of humanity is just a series of random chances. Nothing offers true wisdom or advice.

But wait! Perhaps we're looking for the wrong information in the wrong places. What if we looked for some answers in the Bible? God, in his word to the Hebrew people, and in his word through our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the inspired words of St. Paul and other saints, told us a few things about what's going to happen, and a few things about what we are called to do.

And in some cases we have choices. We know that during his life Jesus carried out a ministry of teaching and revealing God's will as to how we live our lives and love each other in preparation for the coming of God's kingdom. We have some control over how we respond to that.

We also know Jesus' death atoned for our sins, his resurrection offers eternal life, and if we accept him in that way we are transformed and will be with him forever. Again, we have choices.

And finally we know that our Lord will return and rule the world, and drive out the evil around us. But we have no choices about any of that. We just have to be ready, and to already have made the right decisions about those things that are within our control.

This last part might be like a football game where the kick-off already has occurred, but we don't know how long the game will last. There is no worldly clock. We just know that at some time the referee will blow his whistle and say, "Time's up. Game over." And we don't want to be on the short end of the score when that happens.

II.

Today's readings begin a series of three weeks of teachings on God's prophetic plans for the end of age. This week we hear about the signs that will indicate the time is drawing near. Next week we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and King. And in two weeks, we anticipate the reality of that Lordship when Christ comes again in glory to bring God's kingdom to fulfillment.

These stories come up every year at this time as we approach and begin the season of Advent. And in fact today is our only chance during the year to hear about the affliction and adversity that will accompany the end of history. While we do on occasion have readings from the Book of Revelation, they focus on visions of the realms of heaven rather than tribulations on earth.

So let's set the scene. Jesus and his disciples were leaving the temple, and one of the disciples expressed wonderment at the magnificence of the temple and surrounding buildings. I imagine that people might have expressed similar sentiments as they walked past the World Trade Center buildings while they still stood in New York City.

Jesus responded that all of the great buildings were slated for destruction. He said not one stone would be left upon another. That must have gotten the disciples' attention because shortly thereafter four of them asked Jesus privately to explain what was going to happen.

So Jesus began by foretelling disaster for the Jews during the lifetimes of people then alive. And his words eventually came to pass. Within four decades the Temple was destroyed in a four year siege by the Roman army. The people of Jerusalem were cut off, and it was a time of starvation and great desolation within the city.

Then Jesus moved from speaking of actual events in recorded history, and described cosmic events at the end of history. He said it would be a time when nation would rise against nation, and there would be earthquakes and famines, and Christians would be persecuted and despised.

He spoke of a great tribulation where all of humanity would have been destroyed if the Lord had not shortened the days of trial. And he warned of false prophets who would arise and perform miracles designed to lead believers astray. Perhaps those who proclaim the end of the world next month would fall into that category.

Then he said that the sun would be darkened and the moon would not give light. And finally he said that the Son of Man will appear in the clouds in power and glory, and will gather believers from the ends of the earth.

III.

That probably sounds familiar, doesn't it? We have heard that type of apocalyptic language in end-time scenarios from the Book of Revelation. But today's Gospel corroborates those stories, and we also should know that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke contain very similar versions.

And so we don't have to go to the Book of Revelation to find these prophecies. Jesus explained a lot of it to his disciples beginning with today's reading. And that means the Book of Revelation does not stand apart from the rest of the Bible as some sort of strange or fanciful story. Instead it describes events that Jesus spoke about in the Gospels.

And these prophetic images also are consistent with the Old Testament. In the Book of Ezekiel the prophet said, "I will cover the heavens, and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light" (32:7).

And the Book of Joel tells us, "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (2:31-32).

In a humorous way this story reminds of what local merchants call Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. That's when, according to prophecy, credit limits will be extinguished, price tags will turn red, a third of the earth will be covered with shoppers, and the countdown will begin for the final battle between the forces of buyers and sellers.

IV.

But, on a more serious note, what does all this mean now? I would suggest that the purpose of today's Gospel is to set the stage for the larger picture of God's future kingdom. As a result, it also holds meaning for us now as we await that glorious time.

Jesus' words, although ominous, actually convey a message of faith, based in hope and perseverance. It is faith that out of trials, tribulations, and difficulties comes the sure and certain hope of God's peace, Christ's love, and our salvation.

Sometimes our hopes come to pass in this world. Other hopes await the next. But hope in its deepest and richest form always is there for us to appropriate into our lives. God's grace, already given through Jesus Christ, enables that to happen.

Sometimes the hardest thing for a priest or pastor to do is witness to the presence of God and God's love when people are going through tragedy, or their dreams are falling apart, or the world is crashing in upon them.

And in many cases the best we can do is to help them understand today's broken world in the same context as Jesus described the desolation and tribulation in today's Gospel. We hold out hope and God's peace, and a story offers an example of that.

An old preacher was conducting a worship service in a hospital that specialized in treating cancer patients. During the service he took a \$20 bill out of his pocket, and asked the patients who wanted it. Just about everybody's hand shot up.

Then he took the bill and crumpled it up in his hand, and then asked who wanted it. The same hands went up. Then he took the bill, put it on the floor, stepped on it and ground his heel into it. He picked it up and asked now who wanted it, and still everybody's hand went up.

"This is an important lesson," the old preacher said. "No matter what happened to this bill, it's still worth \$20. It didn't lose any of its value."

Then he said, "The same applies to you. No matter how much you think you have been crumpled up, stepped on, or ground into the floor, you have not lost any of your value. You are worth exactly as much to God today as you were the day you were born."

That applies to all of us. We all are of infinite value to God, and we all face the trials and tribulations of this world. And if we believe that God is with us as we struggle through them, then our faith is real even though we can fall into doubts.

IV.

Some people, especially historians, say that we are shaped by what we have experienced in the past. I have another theory. I say that as Christians we are shaped to a greater extent by what we believe about the future. We are sustained more by faith than by memories.

But we also know that faith is not an insurance policy against difficulties, and belief in the Gospel promise does not turn away all problems. Even living as Christians does not automatically resolve all of the hardships of life. But we do experience victory and we can persevere not because of the absence of problems, but because of the presence of faith.

As we close out this season of Pentecost this week and next, and as we prepare for the wonderful time of Advent, I pray that we can see beyond the temporary trials and tribulations of our lives, and look to the permanent things that are part of God's promises to us. *Amen.*