

First Sunday of Advent B - December 2-3, 2017
Apocalypse, Not Now

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So, what do you believe about the end of the world? How do you believe it will happen? Who will it claim? When will it be?

Last year, while leading a pilgrimage group to Israel, I stood with our large band of travelers on the very spot where Armageddon, the cataclysmic end of the world, is supposed to take place, according to the biblical book of Revelation. The place is called Megiddo, the word from which the biblical word "Armageddon" is derived. At Megiddo, we are told, a cosmic battle between good and evil will end it all.

Megiddo is a fascinating archeological site, as well as a haunting and mysterious place, especially given the biblical prophecy assigned to it. But I have to admit that I found it somewhat comforting to note that there was a McDonald's restaurant just around the corner from Megiddo. And furthermore, that particular McDonald's restaurant was being expanded to accommodate a new drive-in window. Which said to me, that at least for now, there is definitely a healthy future anticipated for Megiddo.

Because it seems that across the centuries we humans have urgently wanted to get a look at the "last page," to know when and how the last scene of this whole human adventure will take place.

The followers of Jesus were no different. They, too, wanted to know when the end of the world would come, when time would be no more. Wanting to know, not out of some gloomy, death-seeking fatalism, but because they anticipated that the end of the world would bring God's judgement and mercy, and usher in the reign of God's peace.

But as we hear in this text, Jesus steadfastly resists giving any kind of timetable for that hoped-for end. Which, I think, may be why the lectionary has directed us to this text on the first Sunday of Advent. After all, Advent is about waiting and hoping for something we could not precisely predict, but which we know God eventually brought about in the birth of Christ. Surely

then, God may also be relied upon to bring about a conclusion of history in a manner and timing we may trust.

So, what particulars does Jesus have to offer his disciples about the end of the world? Well, if you notice, he offers none of the fearsome specifics some modern authors and preachers have provided us. Instead, Jesus simply offers us a few assurances. First, he says, "...about that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32 NRSV) Or, to put it another way, Jesus says the future is definitely not ours to know.

Jesus here seems to be teaching us something about time management. Not only is the past over and out of our reach, but the future is as well. The future is not ours to grasp, at least, not yet. Our task then is not to harbor regret, or obsess about the future, but to live in concert with the patterns and powers of God's presence among us right now. For God only knows when the end will actually come.

Jesus' words here in Mark's gospel on the subject of the world's end; they are not meant to be frightening. They were, I'm convinced, words offered to his followers that were intended to free them from fretting about details they could not know, and taking comfort instead in noting the patterns of God's eternal care for us that will stretch on to eternity. With that firm assurance comes the freedom to live now, fully.

One of my favorite films of all time is the great epic, *Ben Hur*, perhaps it's because of its epic chariot race. When filming *Ben Hur*, an enormous set was constructed for this very special race and teams of stunt men were trained to drive four-horse chariots for the race sequence. Charlton Heston, the star of the film, was among the first to arrive for training, and was quick to grasp chariot-driving techniques. Nevertheless, Charlton Heston was concerned - concerned that in the actual filming of the race, he might not be able to pull off a victory. And so, he went to the director and he shared his concerns and the director responded to Charlton Heston, "Charlton, you just stay in the chariot and I'll guarantee you win the race."

You know, maybe those aren't far from the words that God might wish to say to us during these disconcerting days of terrorism, and wars, and gaping

societal wounds - all of which make the world a fearful place and bring us to wonder just what will happen next.

It's not for us to know. Only God, Jesus reminds us, knows the future. But don't worry; if we just stay in the race, God will make sure we win. That is our Advent hope, you see.

While on a South Pole expedition, British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton left a few men on Elephant Island, promising that he would return. Later, when he tried to go back, huge icebergs blocked the way. But suddenly, as if by a miracle, an avenue opened in the ice and Shackleton was able to get through. His men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard. No sooner had the ship cleared the island than the ice crashed together behind them. Contemplating their narrow escape, the explorer said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all packed and ready to go!" They replied, "We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'He may come today.'"

Jesus grants a very different worldview to his followers in Chapter 13 of Mark's gospel - a few predicated, I have heard it said, on these certainties. Where there is **hope in the heart** of a person, **there is the presence of God**. Where **there is God**, there is love. **Where there is love, all shall be well**. So, on this first Sunday of Advent, take heart, for our God, the God of love, is in ultimate control. And that, my friends, is a truth you can safely believe.