

The Boom in Doom...

Proper 28, Year B – Mark 13:1-8

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson November 18, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

You all know who I'm talking about when I tell you I saw a Peanuts strip some time ago in which Linus begins reading to Charlie Brown, "The way I see it, 'The cow jumped over the moon,' indicates a rise in farm prices." "The part about the dish running away with the spoon must refer to the consumer." "Do you agree with me, Charlie Brown?" "I can't say," Charlie Brown replies, leaning, as he often does, on one arm. "I don't pretend to be a student of prophetic literature."

Unfortunately, there are a lot of folks out there these days who make just such a claim in relation to the events talked about in this morning's Gospel lesson. I was channel surfing not too long ago when I was still getting my TV exclusively from an antenna, and ran across one of those TV preachers talking about his new book that supposedly explains everything we need to know about the end of time and the return of Jesus. "You must have this book," he said, apparently from a balcony overlooking the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. An 800 number constantly flashed at the bottom of the screen with the information that friendly operators were waiting to take my call. It seems that this fella had been gifted by God with a special revelation into world events. The rest of us only had to have this book to make it through the final troubles to come. Over and over he declared that God had put a burden on his heart to share this prophetic insight, and the listener could have that insight – for a mere \$19.95 – plus shipping and handling. Me, I kinda' figured that if he *really* thought this was so vital to the survival of the planet, and that the end was so near, he should be *giving* the book away!

Since I confessed back on All Saints Sunday to my usual reluctance to engage in end-times interpretation of books like the Revelation, I have done quite a bit of thinking about that *very* thing. I ought to know better than saying I won't do something – this wouldn't be the first time *Boss* has made me eat such definite words. Anyway, I've been doing some thinking lately, and it seems to me that down through the centuries and millennia, and *certainly* in the *last* half-century or so, I think the church has tended to go in two opposite, though equally *unhelpful* directions when talking about the end times and Christ's return:

On one side, there are folks that seem to have an absolute *obsession* with the end times. I grew up in a church that taught without flinching that Jesus would return in 1968, one generation after the reestablishment of the nation of Israel. I heard that same story over and over, right up until New Year's Day 1969. Then they revised their calculation of the length of a biblical generation and started talking all over again – about 1988. For a long time I thought that was pretty funny, until years later when I heard about Jonestown, and Waco, and Heaven's Gate, and that guy in Florida a year and a half ago. The end times, and our obsession with what's going to happen, and when, seems to *always* be in fashion. We just seem to wallow in what one preacher called "the boom in doom," or to be more alliterative, an absolute avalanche of apocalypse.

On the other hand, those of us who do not share such an outlook, including myself, as I've already admitted, find the whole subject of the end times a bit, oh... off-putting. Some of us, in fact, those of us who tend to wobble our three-legged stool more to the *reason* end of things, pretty much just *ignore* any talk about the end times or the Second Coming. We sometimes are almost embarrassed by such talk, sometimes reducing it to just ancient, obsolete mythology, with no relevance to us whatsoever. Truth be told, we're a little *afraid* of this topic. We don't really know what to do with this kind of talk, or we can't think what it possibly has to do with *us*. But the Creed that we proclaim week by week includes the assertion that, among other things, we believe that, "He *will* come again to judge the living and the dead." In other words, the fact of Jesus' return to draw a close to this age is an *essential* part of what we know to be true about our relationship with God.

There's another *Peanuts* strip that starts with Lucy talking to Linus as they stare out the window on a rainy, rainy day. "We heard about the flood in Sunday School this morning," a worried Lucy says. "What if it never stops raining?" Our scholar, Linus takes his thumb out of his mouth long enough to quote from Genesis, "And God said, 'And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that my bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant, and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.'" "Whew!" Lucy sighs, "That sure takes a load off *my* mind." Her brother takes his thumb out again. "Sound theology," he says, "will do that."

Whether it's fanatic obsession, or willful indifference, there's a lot of *unsound* theology out there when it comes to how we think and how we *act* about the end times: Theology that dilutes the core message of Christ's love. Theology that saps the strength and resources of the Christian community. Theology that just plain *scares* people. But understood properly, the simple truth that Christ *will* come again should *inspire* not terrify, it should *challenge* not debilitate. Like Lucy, all we need is some *sound* theology.

Sound theology in this, as in all things, begins with a single simple confession: You are not God, and neither am I. We do not now, nor have we *ever*, nor *will* we ever, have all the answers. When the disciples wanted to know when all of these things would happen, Jesus simply told them that there is certain knowledge that God reserves – for God. Sound theology means that we would do well to watch out for anybody who claims to have all the answers. They've been wrong since *waaay* before 1968.

Sound theology of the end times also needs a proper focus. I have a really hard time accepting those that seem to preach and teach tribulation and Armageddon and fiery retribution with such fervor and delight, as if they are looking *forward* to a day when billions will die in some world-ending cataclysm. Of course they can do so because they firmly believe that *they* are among the few who will be spared. They are ready to consign the whole world to the devil, in the firm expectation that God will beam *them* up at the last minute. But sound theology says that the best way to prepare for the future is to be faithful in the day to day of living in the *present*.

Finally, sound theology needs to know what the real end is. The absolute key to understanding the theology of the end times is knowing that we *are* now, and we will forever *be*, in the hands... of *God*. One of my seminary professors ended a rather heated classroom debate about the meaning of one apocalyptic passage or another by declaring, "I understand everything we need to know about the Book of Revelation." While he stuffed his notes back into his briefcase and we all looked at each other with our mouths agape, he continued, "It means that Jesus is gonna' win." To me, *that's* pretty sound theology. It's sound theology to say that no matter what the future may hold, the future, *all* future is firmly in *God's* hands. It's sound theology to say that whether it is two years, or another two *thousand*, Christ will be there holding *us*. It's sound theology to say that as the present continues to relentlessly roll into the future, *you and I* are called to be Christ's hands in the world, *here, now*, reaching out to serve and to *love* in the name and in the *power* of Jesus Christ.

Here especially this week, I have been thinking a lot about the many reasons I have for giving thanks. I am thankful for family and friends. I am thankful for all of you, for the ministry we are able to do together in this community, but mostly that you have welcomed me beyond measure to be here with you. And I am thankful that when I do, however grudgingly, think about the end of this world, I know, I *know* that all my yesterdays, and all my tomorrows, and every moment of today, is held in the almighty hands of the One who loves me, and who loves you, beyond reason and beyond measure.

Now, that's sound theology. And it didn't even cost \$19.95! Amen.