

Daniel 12:1-3; Mark 13:1-8  
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What Matters Most in the End

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Praying for the victims of the attacks in Paris in the words of the first verse of the hymn, "O God of Every Nation"

O God of every nation,  
of every race and land,  
redeem the whole creation  
with your almighty hand.  
Where hate and fear divide us  
and bitter threats are hurled,  
in love and mercy guide us,  
and heal our strife-torn world.

From search for wealth and power  
and scorn of truth and right,  
from trust in bombs that shower  
destruction through the night,  
from pride of race and station  
and blindness to your way,  
deliver every nation,  
eternal God, we pray!

Mark 13:1-8

*1 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all be thrown down." 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5 Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.*

Daniel 12:1-3

*1 "At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.*

Jesus' closest disciples worried at his prediction that the massive Temple of Jerusalem would lie in ruins. Privately, they asked him when the End would come. Jesus did not give the date, though he must have known.

Many of you may have missed the story about this, as I did. Fortunately, I was able to retrieve it online from America's most reliable news source, *The Onion*.

dateline August 17, 2011, MENLO PARK, CA—"Though the event went largely unremarked upon at the time, a report published Monday by the Kaiser Family Foundation has found that the apocalypse, or end of the world, occurred three years ago. ...Foundation representative Jodie Palmenterri said, 'According to our data, the total collapse of all human civilization occurred on or around April 3, 2008,' She cited numerous instances of environmental disaster, humanitarian catastrophe, and economic ruin as unambiguous signs that the world had ended, then continued: 'Those who have worried for years that human culture was headed toward calamity can rest easy, because it already happened. We are living in a post-apocalyptic world. This is it.' Palmenterri concluded that because the apocalypse does not resemble the eschatological predictions of any major religion, it's safe to assume the gods have forsaken us."

Well, dear friends, there it is: we've ALL been Left Behind!

What is it about people that makes us want know when and how the world will end? That need must be innate in humankind. An ancient Assyrian clay tablet made 5,000 years ago already predicted the end of civilization. *Plus ca change!*

There was a long-standing apocalyptic tradition in Hebrew theology and scripture. The lesson we just heard from Daniel is an example that the disciples would have known. It explains why they thought the End was at hand when Jesus said the Temple would be leveled. Only supernatural action and force could do that.

The Jerusalem Temple was the largest religious complex in the Roman Empire. Some buildings were ten stories high, stone laid on stone so finely quarried that no mortar was used. The disciples' awe at the size of the stones may sound naive, but even today archeologists wonder at how some of them were moved. The largest---over 44 feet long, by 15 x 10 feet--weighs an estimated 570 tons (that's over a million pounds).

It's not just in scripture that we find apocalyptic predictions; they are peppered through history. A Brief History of the Apocalypse; the website ([www.abhota.info](http://www.abhota.info)) goes on for pages with scores of examples down to the present day.

Scan it and you'll see that for most of Western history it was believed that **God** was going to bring the world to an end---sometimes in fire or flood, sometimes with the Second Coming of Christ with or without the Last Judgment. Millennial predictions went on for centuries after the year 1000 went by without event. Folks recalculated the starting date: first with Jesus' death (1030), then with Constantine's ascent to power (1303), then adding the ultimate apocalyptic number of the Beast from Revelation: 1666 (worse luck for the English, that was the year of the Great Fire of London)

Most modern predictions have a couple of things in common: first the person predicting the event expects to be present when it happens; such humility! And the predictions are a blend of fear, dread, excitement and a measure of relief. *The Onion* piece tapped into the relief when it said there's no need to worry any more: it's over!

Judging from contemporary books and movies, we're as fascinated now as ever with apocalypse. But our causal assumptions have shifted in the last sixty years. Sadly, we don't

need outside help for the apocalypse--be it divine intervention or a cosmological collision. We can do it ourselves.

"We have seen the enemy and he is us." (Walt Kelly, *Pogo*).

First we came up with nuclear holocaust. From the 1950s until the Berlin Wall came down we lived with the very real threat of Mutually Assured Destruction, with the all-too-appropriate acronym (MAD). We're still not completely out from under the nuclear cloud.

And now there's Climate Change: an undeniable and unavoidable challenge to the future of life on Earth. Different from 5000 years of empty threats, this one is all too real, all too measurable.

Where is our hope in the face of something so huge, so complex, so grounded in our way of life?

I see hope in two strands: short term and long term; both include the practical and spiritual.

In the short term we hope for the collective action of the nations. They are meeting in Paris in two weeks. Pray for an unprecedented spirit of cooperation and sacrifice, please, and for the will and courage to follow through--particularly with US.

We may hope that technology will come up with the solution.

Some of us hope--unfairly and in vain--that developing nations will stop their pursuit of our energy-hungry lifestyle. (At the same time, others of us are doing our best to sell that style to those same countries.)

Whatever comes of political leadership, of technology, of others' behavior and lifestyles, you and I have to act. One suggestion is the Paris Pledge, promoted by Interfaith Light and Power. It challenges individuals and congregations to commit to reducing our carbon footprint 50% by 2030 and being carbon neutral by 2050. <http://www.parispledge.org>.

I have signed the pledge and begun altering my ways. Earth Matters has already led us in reductions, including insulation and paying for our electricity come from wind power. The Vestry has asked Earth Matters to study how St. John's could continue toward meeting the Paris Pledge goal.

Then there's the long term. The Climate change crisis took a long time to create and humankind will be living with it for a long time.

In her rich sermon last week, Barbara Mraz said "In church we hear stories that have sustained people for thousands of years."

Today's scriptures are like that. They hold up hope for God's blessing in the present and the future. They declare that the end is not the end at all. Daniel casts a glorious vision of eternal life: *Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.*

Jesus also hints at a future when he speaks of the "beginning of the birth pangs."

Now we see that the Christian faith was being born out of the ruins of the Roman Empire. God was present there, while the political, military, and social structures fell apart. In the chaos, people turned increasingly toward God and one another. They met to worship in homes and eventually churches. And all around the Empire, God was calling men and women to a new kind of life in monastic communities.

Fifteen hundred years ago, St. Benedict wrote a Rule that structured the life and worship of men and women in some of those communities. Since then, scores of kingdoms, nations and empires have risen and fallen. Benedict's Rule remains; It still sustains the life of spiritual communities around the world.

"Apocalyptic imaginings... are always reflections of one's deepest yearnings about God and the world," wrote Professor Amy Merrill Willis. "As such they have the power to turn human knowing into faithful action...to discern righteousness and justice in **this** world instead of simply waiting for it in the next."

Our deepest yearnings about God and the world will shape our actions at this turning point in human history. They will help determine what is to be born from this time.

We have no idea how Climate Change will ultimately effect our world--only that it surely will, as it already has. What we do practically to ameliorate the effects in the short and long term really matters.

The spirit in which we approach it matters just as much. Our faith and our history call us to hope, to confidence in God's sustaining presence in the worst of times.

In closing, this excerpt from Richard Rohr's daily email this Wednesday summed up my deepest yearnings about God and the world:

"Our very suffering now, our condensed presence on this common nest that we have largely fouled, may soon be the one thing that we finally [all] share in common....the one thing that will bring us together politically and religiously. The earth and its life systems, on which we all entirely depend, might soon become the very thing that will convert us to a simple lifestyle, to necessary community, and to an inherent and universal sense of reverence for the Holy.... The earth itself is indeed the very Body of God."