Text: Mark 13:1-8

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

A priest and a rabbi from local parishes were standing by the side of the road holding up signs. The rabbi’s sign read, “The End is near!”

The priest, on the other side of the road, held up a sign which read, “Turn before it’s too late!” They planned to hold up their signs to each passing car.

As the first car approached the driver rolled down his window when he saw the sign and yelled, “Get a job!”

The second driver, immediately behind the first, yelled, “Leave us alone, you religious freaks!”

Just a few seconds later, from around the curve, the two clergy heard screeching tires and a splash followed by more screeching tires and another splash. The rabbi looked over at the priest and said, “Do you think we should try a different sign?”

The priest responded thoughtfully, “Perhaps our signs ought to simply say, ‘Bridge Out.’”

“The end is near!” Apparently, that was true for that road and it is also true for those of us who follow the Church calendar – because the end of the Church Year is also just around the corner. Today is the last Sunday in the season of Pentecost (this season that focuses on the growth of our faith as we journey through the Gospel stories of Jesus healing, teaching, and interacting with those that he came into contact with), next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday (the day we pay special attention to Jesus as our Lord and King), and the following Sunday, December 2, is the first Sunday in the season of Advent (this season that calls on us to prepare and anticipate the coming of the Christ child at Christmas).

So, we find ourselves today near the end so to speak, and as we do, we hear some rather peculiar and unsettling words from Jesus. Jesus is talking to his disciples and his words seem to be saying much the same thing that the priest and the rabbi were saying (or at least what their signs were saying). But Jesus is of course not talking about a road; rather, Jesus is talking about the time to come – he is talking about the end time and his second coming.

The thirteenth chapter of Mark’s Gospel is sometimes called Mark’s Mini-Apocalypse. If we read this chapter in its entirety we might find that its style and theme are similar to that of the Book of Revelation, which is the classic Christian example of apocalyptic writing – which is a style of writing that conveys the author’s vision of the end times, often times revealed to the author by an angel or other heavenly messenger.

Over the years, many people have speculated about the end of the world and the end time. With that speculation come all sorts of questions: Will there be a great war? Will there be fires, floods, storms – a great earthquake? Will there be a sudden rapture where the faithful suddenly vanish as Hal Lindsay once predicted in The Late Great Planet Earth? Will it be as Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye described in their best-selling Left Behind series?

And when will it take place? It is remarkable how many people and groups have made predictions of the end time – some of them have been very specific.

The year 2000 was a popular year for end time predictions – among those who made that suggestion were Jerry Falwell, Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye (of Left Behind fame), James Harmston, Ruth Montgomery, Edgar Cayce, Sun Myung Moon, Ed Dobson, Lester Sumrall, and Jonathan Edwards.

The year 2012 was another year that many predicted would be the year that the world would end – including those who thought that either an asteroid or some other interplanetary object would destroy the earth; some were convinced that an alien invasion or a supernova would destroy the earth in 2012.

And Rasputin, the Russian mystic who died in 1916, prophesied that on August 23, 2013, a storm would take place where fire would destroy most of life on land and Jesus would come back to earth to comfort those in distress. (Much of that last bit of information was obtained by me from Wikipedia.)

And we learn from our Gospel reading, even Jesus’ disciples had questions about the end time. As we dive in to Mark 13, Passover is near and Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem preparing to celebrate this Jewish holiday. Jesus of course had made three predictions about his suffering and death earlier in Mark’s Gospel, but the disciples have not understood those predictions and seem to have no sense that this current visit to Jerusalem is about anything more than celebrating the Passover.

As they are all leaving the temple one of the days of their visit in Jerusalem, one of the disciples points out to Jesus the great stones and the massive structures that make up the temple buildings.

Keep in mind that the original temple was built by King Solomon and had been destroyed centuries before the time of their visit to Jerusalem. A second temple had been re-built, but for King Herod that was not enough. He began expanding and rebuilding the temple before Jesus was born and construction continued even during Jesus’ adult ministry – it was a massive project.

Despite the grandeur, Jesus has a rather harsh reply to the disciple’s comment, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” That got the attention of Peter, James, John, and Andrew and when they were alone with Jesus they ask, “When will this be? What are the signs?”

Our text for today is just the first eight verses of Jesus’ much longer answer to those questions. For the rest of Mark 13, Jesus describes various signs – wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, religious persecution, the betrayal of family members, false prophets, false messiahs, and much suffering – but he says that all these things are only the beginning of the end.

Throughout the chapter, he also makes it clear that no one – including himself – no one knows when the end will be. So he could not fully answer the disciples’ question because even he does not know every detail. Near the end of Mark 13 Jesus says, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

On one level, this foretelling that Jesus is talking about focuses on the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Just as the prophet Jeremiah had predicted the destruction of the original temple, Jesus here is predicting that this re-built temple will not last – and it does not. We know that by 70 AD Jerusalem was under siege by the Romans and the temple was destroyed just as Jesus has here predicts.

But on another level, this foretelling of Jesus is looking ahead even further to the end of time and to his own return. Again, as we look further into Mark 13 we hear Jesus say, “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory … Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Even though Jesus does not know every detail about this end time, as we continue to read Mark 13 this lack of knowledge on Jesus part does not keep him silent about what the disciples should be busy doing in this mean-time. He tells his disciples that in this mean-time they are to be prepared. While they wait, Jesus tells them to be prepared by doing or not doing three things: do not be led astray, be alert, and do not be afraid.

Near the end of the chapter, Jesus tells a short little parable about a man who went away on a journey and left his slaves in charge of his household. Each one had work to do and was to keep at it in preparation for the man’s return. While they did not know when he was going to come back, they knew that they should keep working instead of sleeping, messing around or being distracted in some other way.

Do not be led astray, be alert, do not be afraid – that was the disciples’ task and that is our task as well. We have work to do, and all the worries and all the distractions of this world are merely things that pull us away from the task at hand.

I am not completely sure how you and I can live out this task at hand, but I know it has everything to do with fighting evil and hatred whenever we encounter it. I know it also has a lot to do with showing love and mercy and kindness wherever we happen to be and to whomever we happen to be with. And finally, I know it has a tremendous amount to do with being good – being supportive, being helpful, being understanding, and being gracious.

As we wait for Jesus to come, we have a tremendous amount of work to do. So do not be led astray, be alert, and do not be afraid – for the time has come. Amen.