

Pentecost 24, 2009
Good Hope Lutheran Church
Mark 13: 1 – 8

The sermon text this morning is found in the Gospel lesson, Mark chapter 13. Prompted by His disciples and their persistent questions, Jesus reflects on the times and seasons, leading up to “The End.”

The Lord be with you. And let us pray:
Blessed are you o Lord our God, maker of heaven and earth. In the beginning you created us and all living things, and in these last days you have saved us by the gift of your Son. When the time is right, you will send Jesus back, not simply to end this world, but to begin the one you have always had planned for us. May that great day come quickly, and may we be found faithful when it does; in the name of Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN.

You may have heard this little story from me before, but I think it’s kind of important—a pastor friend of mine some years ago told me about a simple lesson he planned every fall for his confirmation students. What he did, he sat the kids down around a table and gave them each a piece of paper and a pencil. And then he asked them, What if you knew the world was going to end in 70 years, 80 at the most. What if you knew that *for sure*, no question about it, the world was going to end in 80 years, what would you do in the meantime; here, write it down.

Well, these were young people, so their answers were all over the map, everything from the profound to the ridiculous. I would feed the hungry in Africa. I would find a cure for cancer. I would set the world’s record for

consecutive hours spent chewing bubble gum, and so on. But what none of these students ever seemed to figure out, was that for them personally the world *would* end in 70 to 80 years; because for them personally, in 70 to 80 years, the day of their own death would no longer be unthinkably distant, but would instead be something, rather more close at hand?

Jesus and His disciples, that long ago day, sitting in front of the Temple in Jerusalem. Many people today get caught up in what the Lord said in verse 8. Many other people look further ahead in this chapter and fixate on verses 24 and following—wars, rumors of war. Earthquakes, famines, galaxies colliding, black holes, stars falling from the sky—cosmic stuff. *Cosmic* stuff, things that happen *out there* somewhere, and I'll have another chance to reference that for you again in two weeks, Sunday the 29th when our Gospel lesson invites us to again consider this very same conversation. For now I point out, that before this lesson ever gets cosmic, it's very personal. Before Jesus talks about the universe as a whole, He's talks about your individual world, your own personal universe—what matters most to you, and how it too will one day end.

Put yourself in the disciples' shoes. Verse 1, Peter Andrew James and John, put yourself in their sandals for just a minute. There they were, sitting in Jerusalem, right in front of the Temple itself. The Temple was central to

their spiritual life, obviously. It was also a source of national pride, and of personal identity—we built this thing, *we built this*. Our people, our nation, this right here is who we are and what we stand for, it's what we believe in. Memories and dreams for themselves, their families, very intimately connected to this building in a way that's hard for us to understand, and then to have Jesus say, This building is going to come crashing down? Ouch. Veterans Day this past week—can you imagine a couple of vets, seated next to Jesus, watching the flag being raised first thing in the morning? How beautiful the men say, how stirring—to which Jesus replies, That old piece of cloth? Why the day will come when you can't even find two stripes sewn together!—ouch. Ouch, that kind of cuts; and if it cuts you, then welcome to the world of Peter Andrew James and John—what Jesus really did say to them that day about the Temple crashing down, it left them speechless, as we would be as well. What we love too? What matters to us that deeply, what we built what we personally hold dear? That also will come to an end?

Before it's cosmic, it's personal—the world as a whole will end, but so will my little world. People, places, things; hopes dreams memories; the good the bad the ugly; the day will come. It all comes crashing down. All of it, for me too, in a way that leaves me speechless.

Pretty gloomy, maybe. But before anyone here gives in to grief or despair, please notice—please notice what Jesus says in verse 8. All of this ending, is not The End. All of this ending, when looked at in faith, is a not an ending at all but rather a beginning, *it's birth pangs*, Jesus said. It's the start of what God has always had in mind for you, and for the universe! Love, and peace. Redemption. The sword beaten into a plow the lion lying down with the lamb; the Kingdom of God. All this world's "endings"—somehow pointing toward the beginning of what we call the Kingdom of God, do you want the Kingdom? Do you long for what God has promised, and for the day it comes to pass at last? Then, said Jesus, don't fear "endings" in life. Don't fear any of them—putting away your sin, dealing with loss, confronting death itself, don't fear any of it. Only trust God, and see, how He can take it all and make of it at last, His promised new beginning.

Which leads us I think, to the cross. We are people marked by the cross of Jesus Christ, we are people who believe that on that cross the power of sin, ended. We believe that on the cross the reign of death, died. We believe that on the cross things that seemed to be real and powerful and eternal, including sin death the power of the devil, all these "permanent" things, were revealed as temporary—and that what truly remains as real and powerful and eternal is the saving love of God for us, and for all creation.

The loving power of God is what raised Jesus from the dead, and it will raise us up as well, on the day the Lord Jesus returns. The cross marks The End all right, but not really, not for us because we know and believe, it's actually God's great new beginning.

Now, unlike those confirmation students I mentioned at the outset, my personal universe is not going to end in 70 to 80 years. No, I'm older than they were, I'm guessing my universe is down to about 30 years or so. And between now and that ending there will be many little endings, I'm sure; but all of them together form a part of God's great new beginning for me—the kingdom, the kingdom of heaven! The Kingdom is there for me, and for you, and for all those who belong to Jesus Christ and who are marked by His cross—the cross which is the end, but really the beginning, for us, and for all creation too. God grant that it be so, in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.