

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from November 15, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Inquiring Minds Want to Know”

Scriptures:

Daniel 12:1-3

Mark 13:1-8



Now we know. And thank God we have time to prepare. The questions of Peter and James and John and Andrew to Jesus on the Mount of Olives, the questions plaguing humanity since the beginning of ancient civilizations, the questions have been answered: When will this be? What will be the sign? And now we know. The sign has come. And we know it's true because it's all over the Internet and now it's in a theatre near you. The world as we know it will come to an end on December 21, 2012.

If you've managed to miss the hype surrounding the release on Friday of the latest Hollywood doomsday extravaganza – *2012* – then you also may be unaware of the structure of the ancient Mayan calendar which, by some interpretations, comes to an abrupt end three years from now, prompting many to use it as a prediction of a very BIG—and I mean BIG—world change. There have been articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*, and one advance review of the 2 ½ hour movie I read earlier this week offers this commentary: “There's not much hope offered by the 2-hour mark; you can't be blamed for wishing the movie – or the world—would hurry up and end.”

Our passage this morning marks the beginning of the Gospel of Mark's Chapter 13, Jesus' discourse on the end-times, commonly known as “the little apocalypse”, not to be confused with the big ones in the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Scripture and the book of Revelation at the end of the Bible. And rooted in the very first verse of our passage is the essence of scholarly argument concerning when this gospel was actually written and why most commentaries will give a range of 65 to 70 CE. Jesus, outside the Jerusalem temple, responds and sobers his rural-born disciples' wide-eyed fascination with this amazing building: Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.

Many say the author of Mark must have written this gospel in the year 70 after the Roman destruction of the Temple and the sacking of Jerusalem. Still others make a good case for its having been written beforehand, even as precise as the year 69 for this reason: the Jewish Revolt against Rome occurred during the years from 66 to 70, and at one point the Jewish rebellion was successful at running the Romans out of Jerusalem; but as Rome stabilized and regrouped, rumors of their return in full force ran rampant *and* many saw the impending clash and eventual triumph over Rome as the dawn of the messianic age. This triumph would usher in the new age and those who had not done so already were being heavily recruited to join the Jewish

revolt in preparation for the return of Rome and its defeat.

We know now that Rome was the victor, but there are those who point to Jesus' words to his disciples in our passage this morning as the correction to the prevailing belief at the time that this impending clash with Rome was the dawn of the new messianic age. Jesus says: When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the *end is still to come*. 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.

What we didn't read this morning—the remainder of Chapter 13—contains Jesus' indication of many other signs, including his own coming in clouds, and then his final answer to his disciples: But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come ... what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

So humanity has been reading and interpreting and re-interpreting and going back to the book of Daniel and pulling apart the book of Revelation for centuries and reading Nostradamus' predictions and examining the Mayan calendar and tracking the planets and the sea level and long-term weather patterns to answer that burning question just the same: When will this be? Inquiring minds want to know. Because goodness knows, by now we've seen all the signs. Wars, famines, earthquakes, brother against brother. If this is but the beginning of the birth pangs, we've been stuck in a very long labor!

However, the *real* question for us is not “when will this be”, but what difference does it make? What difference would it make if we knew? We make lots of daily decision based on short and long-term predictions: whether to wear a raincoat today, whether to move our investments from stocks to bonds, whether to wait to buy the washing machine until the Sears flyer comes out. We have developed a whole science of probability—just ask the folks up the road at Foxwoods. We want to know the future, we want to know what's going to happen. That's practical, that's healthy, that's a way to stay safe.

But if we rely on the words of Jesus as true, that he will be back and it could be anytime, and that it may still get worse before it gets better, *and* that there may be some divine judgment attached at the end, then it may be that we need to do some discerning beyond ancient formulas and contemporary clues. Whether we choose the perspective of “if I were to die tomorrow, or next week, or next year” which could happen for any one of us, or “if the world were to end tomorrow or in some identifiable time frame”, which is always a possibility as well, what difference would it make? What difference would it make to the way we live our lives if we knew when it would end?

Benedictine monk Anselm Gruen writes in his book *Heaven Begins Within You* that “In his Rule St. Benedict advised the monks to keep death before their eyes every day ... thinking about death enables us to live every moment consciously, to sense what the gift of life is, and to enjoy it every day.”

Live every moment consciously. In facing the end of our existence, be it individually or

en masse as a planet, somewhere in between throwing all caution to the wind to engage in all the bad behaviors we never dared and hunkering down in the basement with a year's supply of water and canned goods, somewhere in between those two rather selfish extremes, is to sense what the gift of life is and to live every moment consciously.

Our usual decision-making processes of how much will it cost, how much time will it take, how much effort and energy will I need to put in, become secondary to discerning what is it God wants from me? What is it God wants from my life? As that discernment becomes primary, as we live every moment consciously:

Our rushes to judgment and criticism of others are replaced by a letting go of hate and a slow realization that all people are children of God.

Our quick tempers and quick answers and quick fixes slowly succumb to thoughtful resolutions.

Our spending habits are no longer habits but deliberate decisions to distribute our dollars with God's creatures in mind.

Our fear dissipates and passionate, loving boldness steps forward.

The Great Commandment of loving God with our whole hearts and minds and souls and loving our neighbors as ourselves rises to the top of our collective conscious once again and street sleepers are invited in, the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the oppressed unshackled.

Living truthfully becomes the norm.

Procrastination stops. Procrastination stops because our time is limited. No more waiting. No more putting off, because we know not the day or the hour when our chances run out. We know not when we'll get to say I love you again. When we live each moment consciously, with a clear sense of what a gift life is, tomorrow, next week, next month becomes today.

Teacher, tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished? My dear ones, if you knew, what difference would it make? What difference would *you* make? The birth pangs have started. We have already begun our journey from one world to the next. May we emerge from the chaos intentionally, confidently, lovingly as the children God created us to be. Amen.

