

A sermon preached by the Reverend Deacon Timothy Ervolina,  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South  
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## **It's the The End of the World and I Feel Fine**

Once upon a time I survived the end of the world. “And,” to quote Michael Stipe, “I feel fine,”

It was a Saturday, and the Central Florida sky trembled with excitement. We'd waited for this day for years. We'd underlined Daniel, and Mark and the Apocalypse of John, cross referencing so furiously that our pens occasionally wore through the thin cigarette paper of our Bibles. It was all there: the wars and rumors of wars, the earthquakes, the famines, the pestilences. The United Nations positioning itself as the government of the world, opposing God's own Kingdom. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge murdering a million Cambodians in the rice paddies. The last helicopter slinking off from the American Embassy in Saigon. People shooting at the President. India under martial law. Native Americans battling FBI agents in South Dakota. And now, the water would burst and the old world would give birth to the new. It was finally October 4, 1975. The last day of the world.

We'd had friends over that night and we played silly games like people do when they're waiting for something important to happen. Hearts and canasta, charades and name that tune. They left, later than I expected, but somewhere before the dawn, and as I listened to the gravel crunch under their tires, I wondered, “What if it doesn't happen?” But how could I even think that? My short, but earnest life had been lived as bet that it would. I looked up at the stars. They looked back. I practiced the Bible verses: “Let God be true, but every man a liar.” “Be watchful.” “The righteous shall live by faith.” I thought about the scholarship I had given up. I thought about my infant son. I thought about what eternity would feel like. I tried to go to sleep, but all I could do was toss and turn.

When the sun rose on October 5, it was just another Sunday. We'd go to church like every other Sunday. The Steelers would trounce the Browns that afternoon. The day would end softly, with T.S. Eliot's whimper. Though there was neither Archangel nor Anti-Christ in sight, nary a river of blood, only a sun burning a beautiful bright yellow, the world did end that day, for me at least. It was the day I started to think for myself. It was the day I started questioning the god I had been worshipping as God. It was the day I died. It was the day I was born again.

Like every other person who has ever been duped by the claims of false messiahs and false prophets, it took a long time for me to learn to trust fully in the words of Jesus about the end of the world. It wasn't until I took off my fundamentalist-issued end-of-the-world glasses that I could understand what Jesus meant when he talked about the end of the world. In our Gospel today, Jesus and his disciples are ending their annual pilgrimage to the Temple. They've tangled with the Rabbis and Jesus has spurned them as hypocritical money-grubbers who are more interested in promoting their social standing than in fighting for the rights of the oppressed poor.

The disciples, as religious people often do in religious buildings, stand in awe of Herod's Temple, with its massive stone columns stretching toward heaven. They have totally missed

Jesus' concern for the poor. "Teacher," says one, "look at this magnificent place. It's glorious, it's wonderful. You can feel the Holy Spirit here."

Jesus snorts. "The Holy Spirit my eye. Listen, don't be impressed by this place. One of these days, this place will be a pile of rubble." And he walks, exuding disdain, towards the city gate.

Later, they gather for lunch under the olive trees on a hill overlooking the city. They've finally gathered enough nerve to speak to him. "What you said back there in the Temple—about the holy sanctuary—when is that going to happen? Is there some sign that we can look for?"

"Oh sure," he replies, with a chuckle. "Here's the sign: you are going to see wars, and earthquakes and famine. You are going to see terrible things, things you never dreamed you'd see. You are going to be persecuted, hauled before the rulers and some of you are going to die because you chose to follow me. But then look out, because there is going to be a desolating sacrilege set up in the holy place. And there is going to be suffering like you've never known before."

He's quiet for moment before he delivers his knockout punch. "There are going to be people, who come in my name, and they are going to try to get you to follow them. But remember, every one of them is a false prophet, a false messiah, and they will only lead you astray. Just be alert is all I can tell you. Remember this—I have told you everything you need to know."

Wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, famine, persecutions. Well, when did that happen? It happened today. It happened yesterday. It happened every single day of humanity's existence on this fragile earth, our island home. While Jesus is foretelling the end of the Temple, but that's not really his point.

He deliberately borrows the language of Daniel, a book written a couple of centuries earlier, when the Archangel Michael, the defender of God's people, stands against their enemies. Daniel's book describes the events that happened under the oppression of the Jewish people by Babylon and Greece, and it parallels the books of the Maccabees. Those deuterocanonical books tell the story of the invasion of the Temple by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who desecrated the Holy of Holies by offering up a pig on Yahweh's altar, and setting up a pagan silver altar in its place. The Maccabees rebelled and drove out the Greeks, and their revolution is today honored in the Jewish festival of Chanukah, the Feast of Lights.

This Gospel, just like the reading from Daniel, is written in language we know as "apocalyptic." The Greek word *apocalypsis* does not have a thing to do with the earth burning up, or the elect being raptured, or the sun growing dark. It means a revealing, an uncovering, a stripping away. Though *that* can be scary as a moon dripping great drops of blood. As the Letter of the Hebrews says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

A fearful thing? You can almost hear the disciples' hearts thumping, you can feel their blood pressure rising. They look nervously at each other, at the temple, at Jesus. How could this possibly be right? The Bible says that plot of ground is sacred. It was the place of Solomon's

Temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world. This is just too scary to think about. A fearful thing.

If what Jesus is saying is true, everything that made sense a moment ago no longer does. How would you feel if suddenly you were confronted with the notion that everything you thought was true was false, everything you thought was black was white, everything you thought was eternal was soon to be a smoking pile of garbage? The sky and ground change places and there's nothing to hold onto any more.

When the time of the apocalypse comes, along come the false teachers, the false Messiahs peddling their fantasies, selling their twelve-disc director's cut DVD of *The Battle of Armageddon* to all the people who are afraid of the unveiling of the truth. Like Dorothy, trying to get through the Enchanted Forest without running into lions, tigers or bears, they just want a wizard to whisk them away to safety. But living in the time of the unveiling means living in the truth, seeing the world as it really is.

It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The Romans, Jesus is saying, are going to destroy this place. It will be scary, but don't be fooled. Remember whose hands you're in. It's the end of the world and the beginning of the world. The world of religiously-based salvation, of Temples and priests and sacrifices is ending. There is a new world coming, a world where God is not in a building but in people, where salvation comes not from our ethnic or religious heritage but flows from the incarnation of the God who lives within and among a people redeemed.

The apocalypse reveals something better and more lasting, as the writer to the Hebrews says: the very Realm of God, alive in and through the people who fearlessly proclaim its coming. God's Realm, as Jesus has told them, is peopled with widows who give all they have, with the poor hoping against all hope for redemption, with the persecuted and oppressed, the addicted and the broken, whose hearts long for freedom. Into it Jesus calls his disciples to minister to them, to be with them in their suffering, to bring them compassion, peace and healing.

The apocalypse is the end of one world, to be sure. But it is as much the birth of another. Where those who understand what is really going on shine like the brightness of the sky. It is a world very different from the world which we see on CNN or Fox News. In that world, the innocent suffer, the poor are made ever poorer, those who are gay or brown or in prison or dying are left outside. But in the new world, the world revealed in the ashes of the old, God welcomes one and all.

Last week at her investiture, Presiding Bishop Katharine Schori preached: "You and I have been invited into [a] ministry of global peace-making that makes a place and affirms a welcome for all of God's creatures. But more than welcome, that ministry invites all to feast until they are filled with God's abundance. God has spoken that dream in our hearts – through the prophets, through the patriarchs and the mystics, in human flesh in Jesus, and in each one of us at baptism. All are welcome, all are fed, all are satisfied, all are healed of the wounds and lessenings that are part of the not-yet-ness of creation."

The New World is here, beloved, and the New World is not yet. It's been revealed, the covers lifted, the false claims of the old stripped away. It is not the old world's riches which bring freedom, nor its military might. It's not religion which brings salvation, nor following some money-grubbing, prophecy-peddling false messiah. It's the ministry of alertness to suffering, of mindfulness to oppression, of compassion, healing and grace.

When I hear people proclaim the death of the Episcopal Church, I realize they are still living in the old world. But the great stone pillars of that world have been pulled down and it lies in ruins. We have a prophetic church, not a fearful church. We have an inclusive and living church, not a church of the ruling regime of death. We have a church of the New World, of freedom, of hope, of redemption. We have a church that knows Jesus, and that's all it needs to know.

The end of the world is upon us. I don't know about you, but I feel fine.