

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 17, 2012 (Proper 28, Year B)
Mark 13:1-8

Every year, our assigned readings for the END of the church year call to mind the end times.

Have you ever tried to make a PREDICTION? Here's MY Top 10 list of some predictions from the past. Now remember, all these were from noted and trusted people in their fields:

10. Charles H. Duell, Commissioner of the U.S. Office of Patents in 1899 said, "Everything that CAN be invented HAS been invented."
9. Western Union wrote in an internal memo in 1876: "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."
8. In the 1920's in response to David Sarnoff's urgings to invest in the radio, his associates said, "The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?"
7. In 1927, when they were still making silent movies, H.M. Warner of Warner Brothers said, "Who wants to hear actors talk?"
6. Marchal Ferdinand Foch, Professor of Strategy, for the French military (Ecole Superieure de Guerre) said, "Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value."
5. Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM in 1943 said, "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."
4. Popular Mechanics magazine in 1949 made this prediction: "Computers in the future may have only 1,000 vacuum tubes and weigh only 1.5 tons."
3. There was an inventor by the name of Lee DeForest, who claimed "While theoretically and technically, television may be feasible, commercially and financially it is an impossibility."
2. Jim Denny, manager of the Grand Ole Opry, said this to a then unknown singer in 1954: "Listen, son, you ain't going nowhere. You ought to go back to driving a truck." The singer was Elvis Presley.
1. Decca Recording Co. made the same mistake when they made this prediction: "We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out." That was their prediction in 1962 concerning a few lads from Liverpool, the Beatles.

You see, we aren't too good at making predictions, but Jesus, the Son of God, is ANOTHER story. As he and the disciples walked out of the Temple in Jerusalem, one of the disciples paused, looked back at the Temple and said, "Look, teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" Jesus responded with a prediction: "Do you SEE all these great buildings? NOT ONE STONE will be left here upon another, ALL will be thrown down."

Now, as you can imagine, this was ALARMING to the disciples. To Jews of their time, this Temple was bedrock. NOTHING could bring down those walls.

And they had good REASON to be impressed. The SMALLEST stones in the Temple weighed 2 to 3 tons. Many of them weighed 50 tons. The largest EXISTING STONE, STILL THERE as part of the Wailing Wall, weighs HUNDREDS of tons! The stones were SO immense that no mortar was needed. The walls were stable simply because the stones weighed so much. And the walls TOWERED over Jerusalem, over 400 feet in one area. And inside the four walls was 45 acres of

bedrock mountain, shaved flat, and during Jesus' day, a quarter of a MILLION people could fit comfortably within the structure. No sports stadium in the world TODAY comes even CLOSE to that.

So, you can understand the disciples' surprise. Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to happen?" It wasn't just a request for information; they were SCARED. The question came out of FEAR – fear of the unknown, fear that their lives were about to change forever.

And they would. Forty years later the prediction came true. In 70 AD the Temple WAS destroyed by Rome. It was completely leveled. All that's LEFT today is that wailing wall.

That's what happens to ALL HUMAN symbols of security—they fall. NO ONE thought a structure so immense as the Temple could be leveled right down to the ground. But then, no one thought the Titanic could sink. No one could believe the World Trade Center towers could be toppled. But these things happen. DISASTERS HAPPEN. EVIL HAPPENS. And OUR SYMBOLS of security fall.

So, we look for security someplace else. When tragedy or disaster strikes, people start making predictions. Just like the disciples, and every generation of Christians since, we read our OWN current events into Jesus' words. Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines—yep, we have ALL those RIGHT NOW. The end of the world must be coming soon.

And we go further -- we want to know WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW it will all end. A few years back I did a Google internet search for "prophecies, end of world" and it resulted in about 721,000 sites. I did the search again a few years later and there were about 46 million hits. I haven't checked to see how many there are NOW! There's a library of dates that have been set for the end of the world that lists "over 200 predictions and counting."

Why so MANY predictions? Because it's another form of security. Thinking we know the future makes us FEEL more secure. But THAT TOO is a FALSE security.

We're missing Jesus' point. He says, "Beware that you are not led astray." Bad things happen. We can expect political and social turmoil, wars and rumors of wars. We can expect earthquakes, tornadoes, fires and every other sort of disaster mother nature can throw at us. We can expect poverty and hunger. We can expect epidemics like AIDS and SARS and Avian Bird Flu and Swine Flu and Covid and all the new variants. As soon as one disease is conquered, another will pop up. We can expect troubles in our PERSONAL lives too: disease, loneliness, depression, economic worries, arthritis, bad relationships, difficult job situations, LOSS of a job. There hasn't been ANY time in human history when these things HAVEN'T existed. They have ALWAYS been with us. And there has ALWAYS been a Chicken Little running around screaming "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

But Jesus says to all the Chicken Little's of THAT day, AND THIS, that the sky is NOT falling. Terrible times do not mean that we are in the END times. They're "but the beginning of the birth pangs," he says.

"Birth pangs," that's an interesting choice of words there. What do you suppose he meant by "birth pangs"? We could lump it together with all the other negative images Jesus uses here, but there's something DIFFERENT about "birth pangs," something that actually EXPLAINS all the rest.

You see, as those of you who have HAD children know, in birth you KNOW those pangs are coming, and WHEN they come they're SO EXCRUCIATING that you don't know how you are EVER going to get through it. But you endure, because of the PROMISE of what lies AHEAD.

I think THAT'S what Jesus had in mind. There WILL be pain, but it's not the end of the story. On the other SIDE of those birth pangs, LOVE will overwhelm us and wipe the pain away. And then we'll see, with all creation, that the end IS, and always HAS been, in GOD'S hands.

As we say in the Lord's Prayer: "For thine is the kingdom, and (thine is) the power, and (thine is) the glory. Forever and ever." It's in GOD'S hands.

What's important isn't WHEN, OR WHERE, OR HOW the end will happen; it's who, WHO it is that's coming, WHOSE hands are holding us. That's the bedrock of our faith. It's the ONLY thing in which we can find REAL security. Our lives, EACH moment and EVERY breath, are in GOD'S hands. And that's a sure thing. Even more sure than Elvis and the Beatles. Amen.