

“The End of Things,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 3/1/26

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This sentence is for some the concise summation of Christian faith. It was the purpose of Jesus’ presence in the world. Without him, all would perish, but through him we might return to God.

*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Saved through him. But saved from what? And furthermore, how would we be saved? How would the whole endeavor unfold?

This winter I have been poring over various theological ideas. Some are more familiar, like the conversation about salvation that populates many Sundays. But some have been less familiar, like the study of sin, known as hamartiology – quite a crowd pleaser, hamartiology.

Today, I wanted to talk about an idea that is common, but which is known by a technical term that is far less so. That would be *eschatology*. This is one of those words we might have glanced over at some point, like in a college seminar before we fell asleep. Eschatology is the study of last things or the ending of things. It has to do with Judgment Day and all that might entail. It has to do with the Second Coming of Jesus and perhaps the Rapture or the Book of Revelation.

I say perhaps for last two examples because not everyone in the Christian end of the pool would necessarily agree to include them. The Rapture is a theological idea, one that derives from certain passages in the Bible but that is not expressly spelled out there. There is the passage from Matthew in which it is said that like those who did not know the flood of Noah would be coming, so too we will not know the day of the Second Coming, the coming of the Son of Man, meaning Jesus. Two shall be in the field, one will be taken and one will be left.

You will periodically hear about someone predicting that the world will be coming to an end on some upcoming Tuesday. That is often because of their calculations based upon indecipherable numerology and the alignment of the planets. Add it all up, carry the 2, and Jesus is coming back that day around 4 o’clock.

And you might note that my tone seems dismissive of these predictions, and you would be correct. Those predictions have been coming since the time of Jesus and Paul and yet we are still here. I do not believe in the end of things as a religious declaration. But we will get back to that.

The same skepticism might be applied to the Book of Revelation, known in the Catholic tradition as the Book of the Apocalypse. Not just my skepticism, but longstanding suspicions of whole religious traditions. For example, Revelation is the only book in the Bible not read during Eastern Orthodox liturgical services. Similarly, the book was almost excluded from the Bible during the Reformation because of its esoteric subject matter. As Martin Luther described the Book of Revelation: "Christ is neither taught nor recognized in it." That is not *entirely* accurate, but the image of Jesus painted in Revelation is quite different from that shown through his life and teachings in the rest of the New Testament.

The end of the world has been a frequent topic of discussion across the centuries of Christianity. People have waited anxiously for the world to end, particularly at the turn of a century or better yet at the millennium. Paul wrote about the end of days in his letters, though he was speaking in the short term, expecting the return of Jesus into the world during his lifetime.

Jesus himself spoke about the end of the world. He spoke about the destruction of the Temple. He alluded to his own death, sometimes sparking angry responses from the disciples like Peter. And in the Gospel of Matthew there is reference to the return of the Son of Man, after great tribulations and lawlessness. But Matthew goes on further: “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”

And you might well say that does not make any sense. Because that did not happen. Which we know because here we are.

Let’s add to that confusion by noting Paul’s similar predictions about the end of times in his own lifetime. He wrote in First Thessalonians: *“[T]he Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”*

First Thessalonians was one of Paul’s first letters, or at least one of the earliest that has survived across time. In his later letters, however, Paul became more circumspect about the prospect of Jesus returning during his lifetime. By then, Paul was under the threat of execution by the Romans and probably thought his life’s expectations were no longer in harmony with his life expectancy.

Have you ever stumbled across something you wrote many years ago? Maybe an old journal or diary? A school essay or paper? And when you read that over, did you come away with a sense of how *young* you were? Perhaps how foolish or naïve or hopeful or optimistic? But now? What about now? Paul may have had this same realization as his life drew to its end.

Christianity itself has gone through something like this process. The New Testament speaks of the end coming, and right soon, but that sense of immediacy has dropped away. Sometimes that means that people are no longer waiting for the end to come, invoking Jesus’ statement that you will not know the day or the hour.

But for others, that existential dread about the end of times remains immediate. It remains top of their mind. They watch the news and stitch together a list of omens and portents about tribulations and trials, wars and famines, doom and gloom. And this leads them to believe that the end of the world is upon us, and right soon.

When I was a child, we had a sense of this. We lived with a constant feeling that the world could end any day, because we were in the midst of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union were in what seemed like endless opposition, maneuvering in every corner of the world, and it was leading up to an apocalyptic clash. That was a daily thought for me.

From a Biblical perspective, by the way, apocalyptic does not mean the end of the world. Apocalypse means revelation, that something hidden will be revealed. It has come to mean the end of the world because of the association of the word “apocalypse” with the end of things

described in the Book of Revelation. The meaning of words can change over time, but the old meaning gives us insight into the why the new meaning took hold.

In a weird way, people take *comfort* in the end of the world. I realize that is a bizarre perspective on my part, though it is not unique to me. When there is trouble in the world, people are understandably anxious and afraid. It would be comforting to be told that all that fear and anxiety will be coming to an end. These Bible passages speak about an ending. Endings through times of difficulty to be sure, but endings that culminate in salvation.

*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Salvation is in one sense about saving us from ourselves. From the effects of our sinfulness and our distancing ourselves from God. But salvation can also be about saving us more pragmatically. Saving us from suffering. Saving us from danger. Saving us from our enemies.

These passages about the end of times can be troubling, but they also conclude our troubles, they end our pain. And if I am already suffering, why not then crave deliverance from suffering? Why not desire the end of the world so I can go on to a better place?

And, by the way, I do not believe in *any* of that. I do not believe that the end of the world is coming today or tomorrow or next month or next year. I do not believe that the Book of Revelation is a roadmap for coming events. I realize there are many who would disagree with me, here and elsewhere. But after a life of anxiety over the question and long reflection on the subject, I do not think the world is ending. I believe the world is *changing*. Always changing and that for some is far more terrifying.

I do not believe in the end of the world, but in an ever-changing world. If you leaf back through history, you will see that people have been making the same claims about the end of the world since Jesus and Paul were still walking the earth. Since the Christian church was created, since the Temple of Jerusalem fell. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, which has happened quite a few times, depending on how you define its fall.

That is part of the problem with predicting the end of times. The end of times might be the end of a certain thing. For example, I believe Jesus was predicting the destruction of the Temple and the resulting destruction of the religious life of his people. He was anticipating a rebellion against Rome, which happened over three different wars. And he was anticipating the final desolation of Jerusalem and the scattering of the people of Judea.

And he was right. All of that happened. That was the end of times – it was the end of the times that he and Paul and their generation might recognize. Every religious and culture practice and institution was destroyed or displaced. Every basic assumption about life was overturned to be replaced with, well...with who knew what at that moment.

When we imagine modern Jewish practices, their commonality and familiarity, we might not realize that everything was taken away from the Jewish people by the Romans. The majority of religious observances in the Hebrew scriptures cannot be performed because there is no Temple. The current practices that have become familiar were adopted over many painful centuries to allow the survival of the Jewish people and some semblance of their religious lives.

If you ever wondered about the fervency for the Nation of Israel, on this weekend of Middle East conflict, think about the many centuries spent wandering from place to place without a safe harbor, without a homeland. Please know that this observation is not the same as agreeing with everything leading up to the present day and the present conflicts. I merely wish to offer insight into the strength of feeling behind the need to reclaim and to protect an ancestral home described in their most sacred of teachings.

Eschatology is the study of the end of things. It has a historical focus on these ideas of the Second Coming and the Book of Revelation. But it could also be understood by describing the end of things far more simply, far more pragmatically.

The Protestant Reformation was the end of things – the end of the Roman Church’s control over most European Christians even as it was the beginning of a centuries long struggle for the souls of that continent. The French Revolution was the end of things – the end of monarchies controlling Europe and the beginning of a reimagination of the fundamental ideas that define society.

Sometimes the beginning of one thing is the end of another. If you were to ask a Native American their thoughts about Thanksgiving, it might not be about turkey and gratitude, but about the conquest of their lands. If you were to ask a Palestinian about the foundation of the Nation of Israel in 1948, they would not understand it as a long-awaited return of the Promised Land but as the catastrophe that took away the only homeland these people had ever known and had lived in for centuries.

Conversely, I am guessing the Romans did not think about the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem as the ending of anything, but rather the continuation of their control over this particular territory. The end of things depends upon where you place yourself in the story.

And yet the Bible is an unusual form of storytelling in that history is generally written by the winners. The Bible is a collection of the history and memories of the Jewish people and, yes, I would include the New Testament in that category. Because Jesus was not preaching to the Romans. He was not preaching to the rulers of a nation. He was preaching to slaves and peasants, to what passed for the poor and the working class of Judea 2,000 years ago.

The truly odd thing about the Bible is that over time it became the religion of the rulers of the nations, and those rulers have reimagined themselves as Jesus’ target audience. That was never the case. The rich and the powerful, the wealthy and the aristocratic, were targets for criticism, not praise. It is hard to read the Bible without noticing that peculiarity, but somehow it has become possible to ignore the teachings of Jesus by focusing on the salvation Jesus represents. It is truly puzzling.

How then should we understand the end of things? The end of things is a story we tell ourselves to offer a sense of a nearing conclusion to difficult times. The Black Death was the end of times. World War II was the end of times. The turmoil of the 1960s in the US was the end of times.

And, for some, the events of the *present moment* are the end of times. America is under siege because of immigration, so it is the end of times. Climate change is a growing catastrophe, so it is the end of times. Events in Israel or in Russia or in China are one way or another, so this is the end of times.

Predicting that the end is coming is a way of offering assurance that your struggles will soon come to an end. And, sadly, I cannot offer anyone that assurance. Why? Because the only certainty is change.

The changes my parents and grandparents went through are stories I have heard but not experiences I had to endure. The changes that I experienced in my youth are old news to my children and grandchildren. And I expect the pattern will hold and they will be having the same sort of conversations with their children and grandchildren. When will it end? Probably never.

Yes, it is possible that something terrible might happen that no one expects, some profoundly stupid act by someone near or far. Yes, it is possible that human beings are their own worst enemy and their recklessness could end up terribly. That is possible.

My problem with that way of thinking is that it is *why* we end up in these horrible predicaments in the first place. We build societies based on immediate gratification and the hoarding of wealth and therefore we ruin things for the coming generations and the current generation. We organize ourselves into competing enemy camps who stockpile grudges and weapons to fend off others with grudges and weapons. We tell stories about how the world is ending and then we live into those terrible tales as self-fulfilling prophecies, imagining every difficulty as a looming zombie apocalypse.

And no, *God* is not doing it. God is not doing any of that. God is not making us selfish; we are experts on the subject. God is not making us fight; we are endlessly nursing old wounds and turning them into fresh grievances.

And Jesus is not telling stories about hating one another. Jesus was and is calling upon us to love one another. To love our enemies, to forgive those who trespass against us.

But it is far easier to hate and to fear one another than it is to live with open hearts and open arms. The end of the world is the terrible bedtime story we have chosen because it is far easier to assume the end is coming than it is to go out day after day and try to build relationships, to trust strangers. To love without reservation.

Fear is sadly the most natural feeling in our hearts. It makes sense to fear, to hide, to guard ourselves from the many hurts of the world. It is the reason it is hard to follow Jesus and why it is far easier to be a Christian. Yes, I said it.

It is far easier to be a Christian who assumes that the world is ending at the first sign of trouble, at the first moment of frustration, at the first hint of not being the focus of power and privilege for once. A Christian often assumes the world is ending because what they want is no longer within easy reach. Which is why I try not to use that label because it requires nothing of me. It is a word without content when it does not require us to *follow Jesus*.

Because someone willing to follow Jesus believes in new beginnings more so than endless endings. They believe in the beginning of hope with every new day. They believe in the beginning of faith with every silent prayer. And they believe in the beginning of love with every encounter, with every stranger, with every child of God they come across in this precious life. So let us follow Jesus instead. And let us seek out new beginnings rather than chase ancient endings. Amen.