

The End Times

Despite majoring in biological sciences, I came close to having a double major as an undergraduate. That second major would have been English Literature, which perhaps explains my interest in words and how they are used as well as the way meanings change or get modified. Both of the texts read this morning belong to the genre or type of literature which is termed apocalyptic. We often avoid this type of literature when it appears in our scriptures because we don't understand it. The use of numerology is no longer common. The symbolic images often carry no intrinsic meaning for us. We especially do not know the ones which would have been known by the original audience. This term or word, apocalyptic, is a transliteration of a Greek word—the word which forms the title of the last book of our Scriptures—The Revelation to John. John of Patmos and the captive Daniel of the Hebrew Scriptures received visions which carried messages from God to God's people. Thus, the term used by John of Patmos is *apokálypsis* which in the Greek means an uncovering, an unveiling or revealing of something of importance. Despite all the various symbols and images used, there was only one revelation—That revelation is that there is a struggle going on between God and evil forces which will eventually be won by God. The message in the apocalyptic sections of Daniel, again despite their numerous use of symbols and numerology which are unfamiliar to us, were meant to carry a message to a people living in the Jewish Diaspora that despite the anguish which they were experiencing, God was their protector. They had not been abandoned and their God had not been defeated but would deliver everyone who is found written in the book according the first verse of Chapter 12. Since at both times of these writings the faithful were suffering from persecution and/or oppression, both of the writings were meant to convey encouragement and hope. But they also acknowledged the current situation which Daniel refers to as a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. Biblical apocalyptic literature also sets this time of deliverance and establishment of God's sovereignty as occurring at the end of time. So although these writings were meant to offer hope—many of those who

received them sought to use them as predictions for specific events. It has also led to the redefining of what apocalypse means. The dictionary now lists two meanings. The first listed definition is the complete final destruction of the world, especially as described in the biblical book of Revelation. Although that definition totally misses the message of Revelation it does associate events with the coming end times. However since the final scene in Revelation is of the new earth with the Tree of Life in the center where God is present in victory it has missed the message given about God's bringing death and suffering to an end. The second meaning which is now listed in current dictionaries is an event involving destruction or damage on an awesome or catastrophic scale; like "a stock market apocalypse". Today, the term is commonly used in reference to any larger-scale catastrophic event or chain of detrimental events to humanity or nature. There have been any number of movies using this theme, including one about the horrors of the Viet Nam War titled *Apocalypse Now* which was released in 1979. This focus on those things described about flood, fires, persecutions, wars etc. seem to draw the most attention whether in movies or in literature. We seem to have a fascination for tales involving destruction. The other focus on the Biblical apocalyptic literature has been to use the symbols as a timetable or road map to understanding or predicting the future. And that has been a tradition which was still in effect when Jesus talked to his followers in the passage from Mark we have before us. As Jesus and the disciples come out of the Temple the disciples are admiring the structure. Jesus is not impressed by the temple structure. He tells them that those great buildings will be destroyed—"Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." The Temple complex they had just left was the Second Temple as it stood after Herod's building program had expanded it. It was a massive and majestic complex. After Jesus and the disciples had walked through the valley and he had gone to the Mount of Olives, four of the disciples questioned Jesus about this statement. It seems they had associated the coming of such massive destruction with the end of times—the day when God would come and judge the world. So sitting there opposite the temple, "Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us when this will be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished." What will be

the sign that the Day of Judgment is coming is what concerns them. That is still the approach many use when they encounter any Biblical apocalyptic text. When we look at the response of Jesus—do we find an answer? We can find an answer if we ask the right question. What Jesus says here is more a warning than a definitive about what you should look for as the final indication that the time is now. “Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. 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 birthpangs.” This doesn’t present a very pleasant future and no clear signposts are given. Not only that but Jesus continues in this vein of dire warnings—saying there will be persecutions and estrangements in families and other disasters for a total of 31 verses, He talks of heaven and earth passing away, but says that it will not happen until after a whole series of disasters and false prophets. He is also clear about something else—there will be suffering in the meantime. And this message is also similar to the one found in Daniel and other apocalyptic Hebrew traditions—despite the suffering which must come—God is in control. When Jesus finally does answer the question about when—it certainly isn’t as a date that can be put on the calendar. Verse 32: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” The purpose of what Jesus told them was not to give them a date, but he was trying to frame and interpret some of the challenges his followers would face and still face. Life was probably a mess for members of Mark’s community of believers. They were trying to understand a delayed second coming, the immense social and religious upheaval caused by the destruction of the Second Temple, and conflicts between rival Christian leaders. This apocalyptic text is an attempt to put these things in a cosmic context which would offer a measure of both perspective and comfort. The truth of our day is similar in many ways. There are still wars and rumors of wars. There is still great suffering and it is hard not to be alarmed about them. Because we dislike uncertainty, we seek definitive answers from the texts about the when instead of allowing

the message not to fear because God is in control to govern our hearts and minds. Jesus tells us not to be led astray by false prophets who claim to have answers other than what he taught. Jesus does not give us a timetable, but he does offer us assurances that God is present and when the end of times does arrive it will be on God's terms and will accomplish God's will. After giving the disciples all these warnings, he tells them to stay alert just because they do not and cannot know when God will bring about the end. A couple of years ago Tim McGraw recorded a song called "Live Like You Were Dying." It is a story song which describes someone who got a medical diagnosis indicating that he was not going to live much longer. The question asked within the song is "How's it hit you when you get that kind of news? Man, what'd you do?" Obviously the song title gives a partial answer—you live like you were dying. There are a lot of "bucket list" items in the song, but it also says things like I became a friend a friend would like to have, took a good, long, hard look at what I'd do if I could do it all again....It seems to me that a paraphrase of that song would fit right in with the message Jesus would have us take from all the apocalyptic events which seem to surround us—they don't mean the world is coming to an end. That will still happen only on God's timetable and we don't have an inside tract to put a date on it. But we do have some instructions about how we are to live—given to us many times—and perhaps we should use those instructions to live our lives like the end of times is happening tonight. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.