

## THE END TIMES

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
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Jesus speaks in today's gospel lesson<sup>i</sup> of living in the end times, when "there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues." He explains that "Nation will arise against nation." The end was considered imminent, apparently, 2,000 years ago, for many were warning that "The time is near," but Jesus counsels that "the end will not follow immediately." Of course we still have great earthquakes today, and famines, and typhoons, and other immensely destructive so-called acts of God; we still have nations arising against nations. But the end has not yet come. Some say that global warming will do us all in within this century, and others warn that nuclear proliferation almost insures that we will destroy ourselves soon. But the end has not yet come.

Did Jesus really say, as three gospel writers report, "Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away."<sup>ii</sup> Dr. Albert Schweitzer, who was not only a well-known physician but also a great biblical scholar, was the author of a now classic work published in 1906, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.<sup>iii</sup> There Schweitzer used this passage

and others like it to demonstrate how Jesus the man, the historical Jesus, was capable of simply being wrong. Heaven and earth didn't pass away within his generation.

In fact, this apocalyptic view caused some serious problems for the early church. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians around the year 50, seems to be saying that Jesus would return to earth while people of his generation were still alive.<sup>iv</sup> So also the author of Revelation, writing near the end of the first century, claimed that the climatic battle of Armageddon and the establishment a new heaven and a new earth "must take place soon...for the time is near."<sup>v</sup> Yet, the Second Letter of Peter, which is seen by many scholars as the latest document in the New Testament, perhaps written as late as 150 A.D., acknowledges that Jesus had not yet come back to earth and that this could make the church look bad. The letter affirms that "Scoffers will come...saying 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!'"<sup>vi</sup> This biblical author has an explanation, though: "Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."<sup>vii</sup>

Of course, the sense of living in the end times has continued throughout the two thousand year history of the church. Church fathers like Tertullian argued for the end being near in the early 200's. The belief became particularly intense at the close of the first millennium in 1,000 A.D., again at the time of the Protestant Reformation

in the 1500's, and then during the 1800's among a number of Protestant movements.<sup>viii</sup> Even in our own time, many thought the end would come with the turn of this new millennium. The expectation of it all passing away any day has continued since in apocalyptic visions held not only by certain clergy but by lots of lay people, including some prominent politicians. According to a Reuters survey last year, 22% of Americans currently think that the world will end during their lifetimes.<sup>ix</sup>

Our reading from Isaiah<sup>x</sup> today takes us back more than 2,500 years, citing God as saying, "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress...the wolf and the lamb shall feed together." Apparently Jesus saw things somewhat differently, however.

Current biblical scholarship, especially that of the Jesus Seminar, which was started in 1985 with thirty biblical scholars and now includes hundreds nationwide,<sup>xi</sup> distinguishes what the historical Jesus seems to have meant when he spoke about "the kingdom of God being near" from what the early Christian church came to mean by those words. The gospels weren't written until after the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. The political results of the disastrous Jewish revolt against the Roman Empire, more than 30 years after Jesus' death, convinced the early church and its first three gospel writers that the literal end of the world was very near.<sup>xii</sup> As a result, the gospel writers are now commonly agreed to have put words in the mouth of Jesus that he never would have said.<sup>xiii</sup> Jesus didn't think that heaven and earth would pass away within a generation. Instead, most

scholars agree that authentic words of Jesus, consistent with his general message throughout the synoptic gospels about the coming of the kingdom of God (usually called the "kingdom of heaven" by Matthew<sup>xiv</sup>), are these words, found several chapters earlier in the gospel of Luke:<sup>xv</sup> "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."<sup>xvi</sup> This is also sometimes translated as "The kingdom of God is within you."<sup>xvii</sup>

Jesus generally taught that the kingdom of God is already coming into life, like early growth from a seed, in the world at large and within human beings who are open to it. In that sense the kingdom is near at hand.<sup>xviii</sup> Jesus speaks of it as being like a seed growing overnight and then sprouting,<sup>xix</sup> or like a mustard seed which is small when planted but will grow up to be a great shrub, putting forth large branches.<sup>xx</sup> Most New Testament scholars agree that central to Jesus' mission was teaching about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven that's breaking into the world already and growing like a seed. It was referenced in his sayings like "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."<sup>xxi</sup> It was part of his actions like bringing all people together to eat at a common table, whether or not they were lepers,<sup>xxii</sup> sinners,<sup>xxiii</sup> foreigners,<sup>xxiv</sup> or tax collectors.<sup>xxv</sup> Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God with a wide range of meanings. It referred to a community living ethically and compassionately. It had to do with a world of social justice -- where the poor become blessed, the sick are healed, and the hungry are fed. And it had a more mystical

meaning. This is the sense of finding the kingdom of God within ourselves -- of also seeing the presence of God all around us, if only we have the eyes to see.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello tells a story of a mystic returning from the desert: "Tell us," ask the people back in civilization, "What God is like." But how could the mystic ever tell them what he had experienced in his heart? "Can God be put into words? He finally gave them a formula -- so inaccurate, so inadequate -- in the hope that some of them might be tempted to experience it for themselves. [Instead,] they seized upon the formula. They made it a sacred text. They imposed it on others as a holy belief. They went to great pains to spread it in foreign lands. Some even gave their lives for it. The mystic was sad. It might have been better if he had said nothing."<sup>xxvii</sup>

Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, does a wonderful job in her book *In Search of Belief* reframing the concept of the kingdom of heaven from a place in the afterlife to the process of active spiritual engagement available to each of us here and now on earth. She explains: "The more we ... immerse ourselves in goodness, the more we become the beauty around us -- the more we transform evil into good, the more we love, the less we hate -- the more we have of the heaven that is here, the closer we are to heaven forever. Heaven is not a place. Heaven is a process of growing fully into the fullness of Being."<sup>xxviii</sup> As she sees it, when Jesus said "The Kingdom of God is within you," he meant that "Life around me will not cease to be whatever it is, perhaps, but life within me always offers more. More depth of

understanding. More of a sense of justice. More breadth of wisdom. More levels of gratitude. More layers of kindness. More grasp of God. Heaven is nothing but fullness of life and union with God. If I do not burst into heaven here, make heaven here for me, for everyone, I sincerely doubt that I will find it anywhere else. This life as I have been given it is my beaker of God who is in everything, everyone, everywhere.<sup>"xxix</sup>

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg reminds us of the metaphor of "thin places" from Celtic Christianity, as the Rev. Joanne Sanders has also described it from this pulpit: "This way of thinking thus affirms that there are minimally two layers or dimensions of reality, the visible world of our ordinary experience and God, the sacred, Spirit." Borg quotes the Catholic monk Thomas Merton as explaining, "We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time...The only thing is that we don't see it." Borg points out that periodically, though, we do "see it" and experience the kingdom of God close at hand. "'Thin places' are where these two levels of reality meet or intersect. They are places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, permeable. Thin places are where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God, experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us."<sup>xxx</sup>

Thin places, or experience of the kingdom of God, can be anywhere our hearts are opened wide. That might be out in nature or experiencing great art. It could be times when our hearts are broken open by serious illness, suffering or grief. The

kingdom can come when we feel compassion for others and a commitment to social justice, feeling the pain of the world and responding to it. Of course worship like this today can become a thin place, from experiencing the beauty and power of the stained glass and mosaics of this church to being deeply moved by Robert Huw Morgan's organ music, the choir's singing, and guest musicians' playing. For many, I think, singing hymns can provide a thin place. So can participation in a sacrament like communion, as we'll experience together this morning.

When we experience the kingdom of God breaking into our lives, our hearts are opened to see the person right in front of us as well as the landscape stretched out before us. Our hearts become alive to wonder, and we find it utterly "remarkable that the world is, that we are here, that we can experience it." Marcus Borg teaches that "an open heart and gratitude go together. We can feel this in our bodies. In the moments in my life when I have been most grateful, I have felt a swelling, almost a bursting, in my chest."<sup>xxxix</sup>

Father Anthony de Mello tells a tale of a little fish who says to a bigger one, "Excuse me, you are older than I, so can you tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?"

'The ocean,' said the older fish, 'is the thing you are in now.'

'Oh this? But this is water. What I'm seeking is the ocean,' said the disappointed fish as he swam away to search elsewhere." De Mello comments: "Stop searching, little fish. There isn't anything to look *for*. All you have to do is *look*."<sup>xxxix</sup>

And so, we do live in the end times always, in the sense that the kingdom of God is near at hand, if only we open ourselves to experiencing it. We must be spiritually alert and awake, always ready to act within its vision and its inspiration. The kingdom of God is among us and within us, every day, just waiting to be realized more fully. AMEN.

### BENEDICTION

For all who see God, may God go with you.

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection,

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...

And the courage to take it, step by step.

Robert Mabry Doss



## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Luke 21: 5-19.
- <sup>ii</sup> Matthew 24: 34-35; Mark 13: 30-31; Luke 21:32-33.
- <sup>iii</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906.
- <sup>iv</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18.
- <sup>v</sup> Revelation 1: 1,3.
- <sup>vi</sup> 2 Peter 3: 3-4.
- <sup>vii</sup> 2 Peter 3: 8-9.
- <sup>viii</sup> Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 189.
- <sup>ix</sup> Chris Michaud, “One in Seven Thinks End of World is Coming: Poll”, Reuters (May 1, 2012), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/01/us-mayanacalendar-poll-idUSBRE8400XH20120501>
- <sup>x</sup> Isaiah 65: 17-25.
- <sup>xi</sup> Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover et al., *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 34.
- <sup>xii</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p 256.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, pp. 385-386;
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 783
- <sup>xv</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, pp. 364-365; Borg, *Jesus*, p. 256.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Luke 17: 20-21.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 1797.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Funk, *The Five Gospels*, p. 385; Borg, *Jesus*, p. 256.
- <sup>xix</sup> Mark 4: 26-29.
- <sup>xx</sup> Mark 4: 3-32.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Luke 6:20.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Matthew 12: 6-13; Mark 14:3.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Luke 5: 29-32.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Matthew 15: 21-28.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Luke 5: 29-32.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Borg and Wright, *Meaning of Jesus*, p. 74.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1984), p. 31.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), p. 50.
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), pp. 155-156.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Borg, *Heart of Christianity*, pp. 161-162.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> De Mello, *Song of the Bird*, p. 12.