Book 5

Sunday September 28, 1975

"THE WORLD IS NOT COMING TO AN END!" Luke 21:25-36

The passage from the Bible, just read, is one of the most difficult to understand and interpret in the New Testament. These words of Jesus are included in three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Because of their difficulty, these sayings of Jesus, along with some prophecies in the Old Testament and in other parts of the New Testament, particularly in the Book of Revelation, have led to all kinds of predictions as to when and how the world is going to come to an end. And that's what we want to talk about this morning.

Not long ago, I turned on the radio early one Sunday morning and a voice announced that the second coming of Christ was very near. The speaker then went on to outline all the various signs which he said definitely pointed to the second coming of Christ and its nearness. It was all worked out almost to the exact month and year.

Perhaps we've all been handed little pamphlets by sincere persons which tell of the world coming to an end soon. Recently I was given one of these and it proclaimed in no uncertain terms the impending doom of the world with the second coming of Christ. It was quite specific.

There have been predictions of the end of the world and the physical return of Christ time and time again. It's a popular subject. Books written on the theme are usually best-sellers. A book entitled, "The Late Great Planet Earth" has sold over four million copies.

There have been numerous times in the history of Christianity when various groups of people have given away all they have and gathered at special places to wait for the visible return of Christ and the end of the world as we know it. Then when it didn't occur as predicted, an announcement was made that a miscalculation in the mathematical figures had been uncovered and a new date announced and again it didn't happen.

New predictions are still being made. I read of a church in California which made special plans. Because of their interpretation of a passage in Paul's letter to the

Thessalonians which says in one place, "Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord," the church adopted a new by-law. It reads, "The blessed hope. . .clearly speaks of an instantaneous and general translation of the members of the Assembly. All pastors, deacons, editors, and other leaders and officers are expected to be caught up alive in a moment of time, thus depriving the church of duly constituted legal representation. In such an event the remaining members shall meet in an emergency church council the following Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. and elect a temporary chairman."

What can a Christian believe about the end of the world and what does it have to do with our living here and now?

1. First we need to remember that the first Christians confidently expected the return of their Lord and the end of the world to occur very soon. Throughout the New Testament we glimpse congregations eagerly waiting for him, praying for his return and singing hymns of longing anticipation. The Apostle Paul expected this to happen before he died. Jesus himself at times at least, seems to have expected that the world would come to an end soon after his resurrection.

2. This means secondly, in order to understand Bible passages like the one we read earlier from the Gospel of Luke, we need to remember that it is written in the language and with the world-view of that time. Thus God is thought of as dwelling in a heaven above, the world is flat, and the Savior is depicted as returning on the clouds of heaven with power and glory.

The fact that the writers of the Bible did their thinking and writing in the world-view of their time is natural and it does not do away with the inner truth of what they are saying. But we mis-use the Bible and its message if today we take it and try to pin-point the end of the world and other related events as does the book, THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH.

In any study of the Bible we have to first understand the world-view of the time in which the passage was written and then ask what the writer was trying to say to the people of his time. Then we can go on to ask what eternal truth this passage has within it and what it means for us in our time.

With this in mind, let's turn to the passage from Luke and see what it has to say to us today about the end of the world.

1. The passage begins, "and there will be signs in sun and moon and stars and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

There's a sense in which what this passage describes is always true. People are afraid of the future, there is always distress among and in some nations.

Earlier in this chapter from the Gospel of Luke, some people around Jesus had been admiring the Temple in Jerusalem and in effect saying--"This is the gate of heaven itself. Nothing has ever been so marvelous, it will last forever." In other words, "we've got it made."

But Jesus had answered, "The temple is all right, but nothing in this world is permanent." Then he went on to say this temple will be destroyed but this does not mean that God's rule is destroyed or that God no longer cares for his creation. Jesus was saying to the people then and to us now, "Do not put your faith in the wrong things. All these things will pass away, but there are some things that will not pass away." That was partly our theme last week. The world is not coming to an end in one climatic moment, but in a deeper sense, the world we see around us and often put our faith in is always coming to an end or as we said last week -- the future is not what it used to be.

However to believe in God is to believe that there is more to life than the obvious, more than we can see. In contrast to such faith, much of our living is spent on that which is temporary. If our lives had to be tagged for their true make up, many would read: This product is not guaranteed to last beyond 60 days.

Much of our living is in the pursuit of things which do not last, and in that sense our little worlds are always coming to an end.

We've seen it happen. We place all of our faith and trust in one thing, one way and then all of a sudden we know we've

made a horrible mistake. What we thought was eternal, is not eternal at all. Every present accomplishment, although seemingly important at the time, is also perpetually perishing.

So when our text speaks of distress of nations and people fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world, it is also expressing our present anxiety as we from time to time allow ourselves to admit the transcience of everything we have put so much trust in, our plans, our dreams, our pet ideas. Every day I see persons full of fear that things will change--people afraid of the future and of what it might bring. This is not to say that we should not plan and dream and work for the betterment of things. It is to say that the whole and final justification for our lives and the whole created order is never to be found within that order itself, but in the reality of God.

2. Now consider the next part of our text. "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory. Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We could take this literally as some have done, but to do so leads us to miss the deeper meaning and truth of the passage. It is saying that just when we see the world and all the things we have mistakenly put our trust in coming apart, then at that moment, we are ready and open to see what is eternal, and that saves us.

In other words, many times it is only when we are driven to the depths; when we have been forced by some event to face what's happened to our lives, what we've actually accomplished; or maybe when we for the first time face the fact that we are going to die; it's then we may first begin to realize the folly of much that we do. It is precisely when we are in a state of distress, in fear and foreboding, that for the first time, we are ready to consider the things that are eternal.

It is just then in our situation of anxiety that our redemption is drawing nigh. A.A. puts it very bluntly in the case of the problem of alcoholism. A person usually has to hit bottom, before he or she is ready or open for help. A person's whole world often has to be shaken

before he or she is ready to look at what's happened and is open for help.

In this sense, the passing away of the present order and the shaking of even the powers of heaven are signs of God's approaching redemption, just as surely as the leafing of the trees is followed by the coming of summer. So despair and hope belong together. When despair begins to take place, look up, for your redemption is drawing near.

Then the passage continues -- "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place." Undoubtedly when Jesus spoke these words and the way the early church understood them, was that the end of the world as we know it was coming soon in a literal sense.

However, these words speak of a deeper truth. The passage is saying that the world is always coming to an end in one sense for all of us, just as it does to people of each generation. But in an over-all sense the world, creation is NOT coming to an end.

Thus the next part of the text re-emphasizes all that has been said thus far--"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

All of creation, the Bible is saying, is subject to change and decay and rebirth. There is nothing that does not change, nothing we can put our ultimate trust in except God himself.

We cannot stop this world at any given point and stay there. Things do pass away and out of existence. Things we thought so important one day are gone the next. Yet we all make statements and take actions as if they were the last word. We speak and act as if we were God.

The text is also warning us not to be too much burdened by the cares of this life, by the anxious striving to secure our existence in this world. When we set our hopes too mch on the perishing goods of the present, it is then that we make ourselves vulnerable to their inevitable passing away. So it was that in the stock market crash of 1929, some persons killed themselves.

So the passage from Luke says -- "Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life; and that day will come

upon you like a snare, for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the earth."

What then is the solution? What is the good news? The text answers its own question. "Watch, be prepared." Our only strength is to put our faith and trust in that which is eternal, in God. The creation is not coming to an end totally at one point in time. Rather Christ is continually coming to us and to others. Once when someone asked me, "When is Christ coming again?" I replied, "I didn't know he had left." The creation is not closed, it is open.

When we say that Christ will come again, we are saying that God always finally judges all things in his own way and his own time. It is also saying that God is continually redeeming his creation.

So we are not to be primarily concerned with dates and timetables and predictions, as Jesus himself said. Rather we are to be concerned that we are cooperating with God on the side of the good and living each day fully. Some time ago, a New Yorker cartoon showed a man leaving his home in a white robe and carrying a sign which read, "The world is coming to an end." It showed his wife calling after him saying, ""Just in case it doesn't, what do you want for dinner?"

To say that Christ will come again is really to say that in the midst of our world of evil and tragedy, God will ultimately and is always bringing good out of what we see as evil. Of course we may be nervous and and anxious in the meantime even though we know it's all going to come out all right. It's something like what a priest, the vice-president of Creighton University said as he was listening to a delayed broadcast of the school's basketball win over Bradley, he wondered aloud, "Why am I so nervous? I know how this comes out." A fellow Jesuit said, "Now you know how God must feel."

God's world is not coming to an end, however it remains for us to be alert and open so that God's continual coming and the many endings that we all experience will not make life a terror, but an overwhelming joy. Amen.