Sunday, November 15, 1992
THE WORLD IS ALWAYS COMING TO AN END
Luke 21:5-9,25-33

On Monday, November 9, I was driving along a major highway, and I saw this large sign that said, “The world is coming to an end on October 28, 1992.” Someone should have taken the sign down, but maybe those who put it up expected the end of the world to do that. I’m sure the sign was placed there by followers of a Korean evangelist who earlier this fall had predicted the end of the world and the return of Christ on October 28. A few days earlier, I had come across a short news story revealing that this same Korean evangelist had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonds that would not mature until sometime late in 1993, and he was also under indictment for misusing church funds.

Predictions by religious leaders, some sincere and some not so sincere, that the end of the world will occur on a specific date are nothing new. When Jim Goode, our Associate Minister for Youth, discovered the title and theme of today’s sermon, he gave me a little booklet that had been given to him back in 1987. The title of the booklet was “88 Reasons Why The Rapture Could Be In 1988.” “The Rapture” refers to the belief that there will come a time when Christ will, in an instant, take all of his true followers directly into paradise, followed by the end of the world. The idea of the “rapture” is based on several sentences from Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica:

“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.”

A book by Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth, first published in 1970, has sold over 4,000,000 copies, and its subject is the end of the world, which he claims is imminent, although he has not set any specific date.

Perhaps the greatest surge in the belief that the end of the world was close occurred in this country in the early 1800s. The individual at the center of the movement was a man named William Miller. He was born in Massachusetts in 1782 but grew up in upstate New York. His formal schooling consisted of the rudimentary education that the three-month wilderness schools afforded at that time. In spite of educational handicaps, Miller learned to read well and thus became a self-educated man. After a conversion experience, Miller began a reverent study of the Bible and became convinced that Christ would return soon and bring an end to this world as we know it. Using all kinds of complex mathematical formulas, he predicted that this would happen in 1843 or 1844. Eventually, the exact date of October 22, 1844, was chosen.

For some reason, despite the fact that many dates have been predicted and none have come true, new predictions continue to be made, and each one gathers a certain number of followers.

What is it that draws people to follow a religious leader who predicts that the world is soon going to end? Perhaps it’s comforting for them to believe that they are part of an exclusive group who will inherit paradise. Maybe, too, they figure that almost any life in another world will be better than this one. It provides a quick and simple solution to whatever problems one is facing.

However, there's a deeper question: What can a Christian believe about the end of the world, and what does it have to do with our living here and now?

First, we need to remember that many of the early Christians in the first century confidently expected the return of Jesus in a physical body, and they further believed that the end of the world was tied to this return in some way. Throughout the New Testament, we glimpse congregations eagerly waiting for him, praying for his return, and singing hymns of longing anticipation.
According to the gospel accounts, Jesus talked about his return and indicated that one day the world as we know it would come to an end, or at least those who heard Jesus later remembered and interpreted what he said in that way. The writers of the gospels were also influenced by Jewish ideas from the Old Testament. Many Jewish people in Jesus' time and before believed that their present age was wicked and deformed by suffering — so much so that one day God would bring a new age of peace, joy, and love.

This idea was as old as some of the prophets. Listen to Malachi: "See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble... but for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." (Malachi 4:2)

The early Christians adapted this hope. God's victory would take place by means of the return of Jesus with glory and power. This hope was conceived in the womb of suffering and persecution.

Second, to understand what the gospels in the New Testament have to say about the end of the world, we need to remember that they are written in the language and context of the worldview 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 worldview of their time is natural, but it does not do away with the inner truth of what they were saying. However, we misuse the Bible and its message for us today if we take it and try to pinpoint the end of the world and other related events as does the book The Late Great Planet Earth. The same is true of others who try to set exact dates and times and events.

Now let's return to our basic question: What are some of the inner truths these gospel accounts teach us when they talk about the end of the world?

First and foremost, the Bible reminds us that the world as we know it is always coming to an end. Nothing except God is permanent.

The religious people in Jesus' time were much impressed by the Temple in Jerusalem. Many thought it was the gate of heaven itself. Nothing ever built was or would ever be in the future that marvelous. It would last forever. However, Jesus reminded them that although the temple was an important symbol and gathering place for practicing their religious faith, it was not permanent. He went on to say to them that one day in the not-too-distant future, the temple would be destroyed, but this would not mean that God's power had come to an end or that God no longer cares for the 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."

The whole earth may not come to an end in one climactic moment, but in a deeper sense, the world we see around us is always coming to an end. For example, did you know that 99% of all the species that have lived on earth have died away?

However, to believe in God is to believe that there is more to life than the obvious, more than we can see, touch, hear, smell, or taste. Yet much of our living is spent on that which is temporary, which will come to an end. If our lives had to be tagged for their true makeup, many would read: “This product is not guaranteed to last beyond sixty days.” The Bible is always reminding us that what we often think of as being eternal is not eternal at all.

Not only do all the material things we worship go away, but there are dozens of other kinds of daily losses that afflict us. Losing possessions need not necessarily change a possessor. But the breaking of relationships alters us. When your children, if you have them, grow up and go away, the relationship is different, and it can never be the same again. Why does the mother of the bride cry? For happiness? Well, yes. But for sorrow too. An end has come, and with it, a new beginning.

When parents slip toward senility and children must assume the role of parent to their parents, no one should be shocked by feelings of sudden and tremendous sorrow. The little worlds in which we live are always coming to an end. Every present accomplishment, although seemingly important at the time, is also perpetually perishing. The world is always coming to an end.

Is there anything in life that does not change and go away? Separation, distance, loss of friends and family, loss of cherished hopes and dreams, loss of all the little things that give meaning to our lives. Ultimately, these losses are little deaths that come to us each day; little worlds that come to an end. Death does not wait till the end of our lives to meet us and make an end. Instead, we all die a hundred times before we die, and all the little endings on the way are like a slowly growing echo of the final bang.

So when the gospels speak 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 face experience and allow ourselves to admit the transience of everything we have put so much trust in — our plans, our dreams, our relationships, our pet ideas. Every day, I see people full of fear that things will change, people afraid of the future and what it might bring, and rightly so because the world as we know it is always coming to an end.

This is not to say that we should not plan, 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.

Even with the world always coming to an end, there is hope and good news. The gospels tell us, “And then they will see the Son of God 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.”

What’s the deeper truth portrayed here? The gospels remind us 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 what 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 or some loss to face what's happened to our lives, or maybe with all the little deaths we experience, and for the first time, through serious illness or some other close call, we face the fact that we are going to die — then and then only we may first begin to comprehend 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. As A.A. puts it, many alcoholics have to hit bottom — their world as they know it has to come to an end — before they are ready or open for help. So despair and hope belong together. When despair begins to take place, look up, for your redemption is drawing near. It is often then and then only that we are ready to be open to the Spirit of God.

And when we are open to the Spirit of God, we are no longer burdened down by many of the little worries and cares of this life or by the anxious striving to secure our existence in this world. We no longer put our faith and hope in the perishing goods of this world. And we also begin to pay more attention to the important relationships with others because we know that one day they will end.

At the funeral of her beloved husband, the wife of the man who had died asked if she could say a word to the congregation. "If you are going to love somebody," she said with tears in her eyes, "do it today. If you are going to tell someone that they are special, that their life has touched yours, do it today." She had become wise the hard way.

According to Jesus, we are not to be primarily concerned with dates, timetables, and predictions. Rather, we are to be concerned that we are cooperating with God on the side of the good and living each day fully.

I believe that Jesus continues to enter our world in fresh ways each day. I also believe that God continues to bring good out of what we see as evil and that when all is said and done, the goodness of God will triumph.

Of course, we may be nervous and anxious in the meantime, even though we know it's going to come out all right. It's something like what a priest, the President of Notre Dame University, said as he was listening to a delayed broadcast of the school's football game with the University of Southern California, and he knew in advance that Notre Dame had won. "Why am I so nervous?" he wondered aloud. "I know how this comes out." Amen.