Sunday, November 16, 1997
WHEN IS THE WORLD COMING TO AN END?
Mark 13:1-8

A lot of people I know are already making plans for December 31, 1999. For creative entrepreneurs, the year 2000 promises huge sales in commemorative junk. Party planners for New Year's Eve, December 31, 1999, hope to make a bundle of money. In a related issue, some computer programmers are not so happy and are warning us of huge problems in computer systems that use only two digits to designate a year.

There are religious people who tell us that the dawn of the year 2000 will bring bad news to some and good news to others. They envision the end of the world as we know it. For faithful believers, unending punishment and suffering.

This past March 1997, the members of the Heaven's Gate cult in southern California got a jump on the year 2000. Thirty-nine sad, strange, purple-shrouded figures took their own lives in order to enter paradise ahead of the rest of us.

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; however, there are always more predictions that it will happen when we come to the end of a millennium. Thus, we can expect an increasing number of predictions about the soon-to-be end of the world as we get nearer the year 2000.

Until now, 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 moment 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 3-month wilderness schools afforded at that time. Even though he lacked formal educational opportunities, Miller learned to read well and became a self-educated man.

Following 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, of course, Miller and his followers were disappointed, but this did not end the belief that the world was coming to an end soon.

For some reason, in spite of the fact that many dates have been predicted and none of them 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 end of the world is coming soon? One reason is that there are passages in the Bible which indicate that the story of creation itself will arrive at an ending. The whole great dance of things will come to a stop. Histories will terminate. The light will go out. The whole show will close down. The door will slam shut. God may open another door after that dance, but the only dance we know about is heading for an end.

In addition to the fact that there are passages in the Bible that indicate the world as we know it will come to an end, another reason that people are drawn to religious leaders who predict the

end of the world coming soon is that it's comforting for them to believe that they are part of an exclusive group who will inherit paradise while the rest of us will not. Maybe too, they figure that almost any life in another world will be better than this one. It provides a quick, simple, and final solution to whatever problems one is facing.

So today, let's consider again what we as Christians can believe about the end of the world and what the content of that belief has to do with our living here and now.

In the first place, we need to remember that many of the early Christians in the first century, when the New Testament was written, confidently expected the return of Jesus in a physical body in their lifetime, and they further believed that the end of the world as they knew it was tied to this return in some way.

It is also clear that in some of the gospel accounts, Jesus talked about his return and implied that one day the world as we know it will end, or at least those who heard Jesus remembered and interpreted what he said in that way.

The writers of the gospels and the Apostle Paul were also influenced by Jewish ideas from the Old Testament. There were those who were part of the Hebrew tradition in Jesus' time and before who believed that their present age was wicked and deformed, so much so that one day God would bring in a new age of peace, joy, and love.

The 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, especially during times of persecution. Then it was especially comforting to believe in God's victory and the return of Jesus with glory and power.

The second thing to remember is this: if we want to begin to understand what the New Testament writers had to say about the end of the world, we need to put it into the context and worldview of that day.

The understanding of the creation at that time was that we lived in a small three-story existence. The world was flat. There was no knowledge of any other planets or of the immensity of the universe. God and the angels were in the heavens above, and other creatures and nothingness were below. Thus, the Savior was 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 context of the worldview of their time is natural. They could do it no other way. This means that we have to go beyond their worldview and look for the inner truth of what they were trying to say.

We misuse the Bible and its message for us today if 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.

What then are some of the deeper truths which these Bible stories and prophecies about the end of time contain?

First and foremost, the Bible tells us not when the world is coming to an end on an exact date but that the world is always coming to an end. Nothing except God and God's love are

permanent. The story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark is especially instructive on this point.

One day, as Jesus came out of the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem, one of the disciples reminded him of the beauty and endurance of the Temple, implying that nothing could ever destroy it.

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 in the future be that marvelous. It would last forever. Thus, it was a shock to the disciples and to others who remembered the words of Jesus to hear him say that the Temple would be reduced to rubble. "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

That's hard to imagine. We tend to think that many things are permanent. For example, it's almost impossible for me to entertain the thought that one day this beautiful church building will not be here. It may last several hundred more years or even a thousand, but it's not eternal. There will come a time when it will no longer exist.

You and I feel the same way about other buildings. I always admire our state capitol building here in Lincoln. Every time I go to Washington, D.C., or to New York City, it's difficult to imagine that sometime in the far distant future, those buildings will not be there. This past summer when in Rome, it was almost impossible for us to contemplate that there will come a time in the future when that building is no more.

So I can understand the shock of the people when Jesus told them that one day the Temple would no longer be there. It was the visible symbol of their deepest religious traditions of the past, and it contained their hopes for the future.

Jesus didn't have to be clairvoyant to make this prediction. He was reminding them and us that every humanly designed and constructed temple or institution eventually comes tumbling down. Every structure and system for containing the "holy" will wear out its use, will disappoint, and die. St. Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." But we so often confuse the vessel with the treasure. The treasure of God's love is eternal; the vessel is not.

One Biblical commentator put it this way: "Name any temple you like, any ground that is sacred to us because at one time or another God met us there: a church, denomination, neighborhood, family, friendship, vocation, passion, memory, or dream — they all have a lifespan, and they all come to an end. They may die of natural causes, ceasing to exist as we who inhabit them die or move on."

In the Old Testament tradition, the first temple was a tent, and it was movable and flexible. But sooner or later, we can try, as did the people then, to manage the mystery, and we can make something rigid, and one day it tumbles from rigidity and overweight. While it's true that all things come to an end, there are things we do or don't do which can bring an end before its time. Or to put it another way, because we know that all things will sometime come to an end, that does not absolve us from the responsibility of taking care of it and doing our best to keep it going.

The second main point is this: although the world as we know it is always coming to an end, that's not necessarily bad news. It's also good news. When Jesus said that the Temple would one day no longer exist, he was also saying that this did not mean that God's power had failed

or come to an end. It would not mean that God no longer cares. It is important for us not to confuse the treasure with the vessel.

God is reminding us through the words of Jesus, “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. God’s love and care are forever.”

The world may not come to an end in one climactic moment, but in the deepest sense, the world around us, our little worlds as we know them, are always coming to an end. One of the most surprising facts I’ve come across is: “Ninety-nine percent of all the species that have lived on earth have died away.”

Although many endings in our world are painful, the Bible tells us that the gospel is good news because it is possible to see endings as occasions for new beginnings and new faith. Sometimes it is only when our temples tumble that new forms of faith can rise from the ruins.

This business of endings and new beginnings touches all of our lives. The breaking and losing 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 do the parents of the bride and groom sometimes cry at the wedding? For happiness? Hopefully, 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 parents to their parents, no one should be shocked by feelings of a sudden and tremendous sorrow. The worlds in which we live are always coming to an end. Every present accomplishment, although very important at the time, is also perpetually perishing.

Lest we misunderstand, Jesus is not saying that because all things go away, we should not plan and dream and work for the betterment of the world. Martin Luther said, “If I knew the world was coming to an end tomorrow, I would still plant the apple tree today.” As Christians, we are not to be primarily concerned with dates and timetables and predictions. Rather, we are to be concerned with whether or not we are cooperating with God on the side of the good and living each day to its fullest. Then God’s timetables take over.

When is the world coming to an end? Our worlds are always coming to an end. When will Jesus return? I didn’t know he ever left. I believe that the love of God, as expressed in 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 and love of God will triumph.

Of course, we might be nervous and anxious in the meantime, even though we know it’s going to come out all right. It’s something like what 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. Notre Dame had won. “Why am I so nervous?” he wondered out loud. “I know how this comes out.” Amen.