Introduction to the Scripture Reading

Chapter 13 of Mark begins with the disciples remarking on the beauty of the temple as they are leaving it. This appears to have precipitated a talk by Jesus about end times. This is Mark’s version of Jesus’ “farewell discourse” to his disciples. He commands his disciples to watch for the coming of the Son of man. It assumes that after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, the disciples will have deep feelings of loss in Jesus’ absence. Although it will feel like their world has ended, Jesus’ words offer them hope for his return.

We should feel fortunate to be alive today. For the third time in three months, it was predicted that a fake planet would destroy the earth last Sunday. We “dodged a bullet” – again! A NASA Scientist has become frustrated with the need to explain that there is no such planet, never has been, and presumably never will be. But the fake internet theory will not go away. 1

This fall given the national and global events we have experienced, several times I have heard the questions, “Are we in the end times?” “Is the end of the world at hand?”

The question was raised in August with the solar eclipse, when as the scripture says, “the sun will become dark and the moon won’t give its light.” There is upheaval in many lands, not only in the developing world, but also in developed nations. We have witnessed violence of horrific magnitude. We have watched as hurricanes, earthquake, and fire have demolished communities.

In September, Category 5 Hurricane Maria pelted Puerto Rico with wind and rain for over 30 hours, causing a catastrophic event unparalleled in American history. Gone were airports and roads. Eighty percent of the island’s crops were destroyed. Cell towers were knocked down. Electricity was suddenly a thing of the past, and likely to stay that way for many months. They’ve retreated to pre-modern times and must feel like the world as they knew it has come to an end.

This month has held a rapid unveiling of harassment charges against numerous people, signaling a collapse of moral standards which stretches back decades. It appears that we are on a trajectory downward from which there is no return.
In Bill Schorr’s *Grizzwells* comic strip, a goat walks by carrying the sign, “The World Will End Tomorrow.” Shortly after, another creature walks by carrying this sign: “Only One Shopping Day Left.” A fitting illustration for these days between Black Friday and Cyber Monday when our culture tries to convince us that we can end our personal chaos with the perfect product at a discounted price.

What does scripture say about the end of the world? In common language, the idea of apocalypse has come to be understood as catastrophe of great scale. But there is another meaning of apocalypse. The word comes from the Greek for “uncovering” or “revealing.” It is a word about possibilities. It invites us to glimpse the new life it is possible to build from the ashes of the old. The apocalyptic vision is meant to give hope that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, in the end good will prevail.

Kathleen Norris says that it makes her think about a treasured idiom of the western Dakotas. Knowing that many of you hail from the Dakotas, you may have heard of ‘next year country.’ “It’s a description of the landscape that farmers and ranchers dwell in – next year rains will come at the right time; next year I won’t get hailed out; next year winter won’t set in before I have my hay hauled in for winter feeding.” ii ‘Next year thinking’ gives the hope of new life and fresh possibilities. Next year more rain will prevent us from sliding back into drought. Next year new leaders will be elected. Next year will be better than this year.

I hear the phrase “the end of the world” as a wise pun with two meanings. The end of the world, as in the stopping of the current world, a cessation of life as we know it. And the end of the world as the goal or destination of the world.

The end point, the destination, the goal of God’s unfolding and evolving creation is that we arrive at the point of wisdom where we accept that we are God’s beloved creatures. God’s, not our own. Beloved, not abandoned. Creatures, not creators. The end of the world, the goal of the world, is the harmony that comes from recognizing who we are and whose we are.

The truth is that we usually need to move through some chaos before we arrive at next year or our final goal. Margaret Silf says, “Chaos is not bad news, a mess that we have to bring back into the right kind of order, the order that existed before we messed up. On the contrary, chaos is a sacred reality, the very thing that is needed for a new creation to begin. Chaos is a gift, overflowing with potential.” iii

Chaos theory teaches us that ordered systems periodically fall apart and disintegrate into disorder. The old system we thought we had a grip on has
suddenly gone to pieces. Physics tells us that breakdown is a necessary precursor of breakthrough. Chaos theory also teaches that “within the chaos there is a new order trying to reveal itself.” In our Christian perspective, the new order is the reign of God. Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God which is already but not yet fully present. The Body of Christ is intended to be a visible sign of the reign of God in our secular world. We are beacons of light in the darkness, heralding the hope of a new day. We are ‘next year’ people with signs that proclaim, “A new day is dawning. Get ready.”

Jesus tells the parable of the homeowner who puts his servants in charge while he is traveling. He doesn’t know when he will return, so they must always be ready to present the home in good order when the master returns. We are now those stewards of God’s good creation. We are not given permission to sit back, relax and have a good time, trusting that God will clean up any mess that we make when Christ returns. We are called to be vigilant in caring for the gifts of God entrusted to our care – the gifts of one another; the gift of Christ’s Body, the church; the gift of reason, that we might use our knowledge for good; the gift of creation. We must tend to the survival of creation, curbing self-indulgent practices that harm God’s good earth. We must treat human life with sacred respect, prohibiting the dehumanization of others, even those who differ from us or those with whom we disagree. Given Jesus’ teaching that violence does not solve disputes, we must seek to do no harm to one another in resolving our differences. Only love will guide us in working for the good of all. The goal of God’s reign on earth depends not on our competition, but on our cooperation.

In the midst of turmoil, we are called to actively wait and to watch for glimpses of God’s creative work among us. In the face of multiple disasters of recent months, we have heard stories of those who have responded with compassion, presence, and generosity to those in need. Amidst the turmoil, humans have stepped forth to help other humans without consideration of religion, ethnicity, political preference, or favorite sports team. Through the lens of compassion, we’ve simply seen human beings in need and have responded from the heart. That is a sign of God’s reign breaking in. It is so easy to be overcome by despair that we cannot see through the fog to the good that is happening right before us.

In 2005 Bill Lemke worked at the San Francisco Food Bank with his 17-year old son, Brian and their church youth group from Tacoma, Washington. Bill noticed as food was delivered from retailers, manufacturers, and the public and
then distributed to agencies serving the hungry. Having been in the furniture business for over 30 years, Bill began to imagine the same process happening with furniture. His son Brian died of lymphoma that year on Thanksgiving Day. Brian had “nagged” his parents to follow through on the great idea. Six months later the dream started becoming a reality. In Orlando, they visited The Mustard Seed which is a 15,000-square foot furniture bank! The director of the Mustard Seed told them, “If you two don’t do this, you will be two of the most miserable people on earth.”

Over a decade later, the Northwest Furniture Bank in Tacoma serves nearly 100 families a month. They serve victims of domestic abuse, people suffering loss from fire and natural disasters, foster children, and especially families coming from transitional housing who are trying to rebuild their lives. Many can barely afford housing and food, let alone a bed to sleep on or a table to sit at. Furniture is a basic need that determines how people feel about themselves and how well they will perform at work or at school.

Thousands of children in northwest Washington have a bed of their own, some for the first time in their lives. Families have tables and chairs to eat together, some for the first time. A woman who is eight-and-a-half months pregnant no longer must sleep on the floor. “I can’t believe there are people out there with such good hearts,” she said.

Many families who thought their lives were coming to an end have had stability, dignity, and hope restored. Next year became better than last year. People feel beloved, not abandoned. Out of the chaos a new way of life broke through. Bill Lemke didn’t wait for someone else to do something. He acted on his son’s inspiration and has made a difference in countless lives. Bad news stories have had a good ending. The grace and goodness of God has been revealed as the possibility of new life emerged from the ashes of the old.

Once asked what he would do if he believed the world would end tomorrow, Martin Luther is said to have responded, “I would plant a tree today.” Confident of God’s love and certain of God’s promises about the future, we can also invest in the present, in the everyday and ordinary, in the people and causes around us. For we have God’s promise in the cross and resurrection that in time God will indeed draw all of God’s creation not to any end, but to a good end.

Creator God, you fashioned this world and called it good. You desire the health of planet earth and all who inhabit it. We are grateful that your care for creation continues, even when we make your work more difficult. Forgive us for
ways in which we have harmed one another and abused the environment. We confess that sometimes we choose the easy, comfortable way, which distances us from you. We acknowledge your greatness, O God, and we stand in humble reverence before you. We long for your guiding presence, leading us from conflict to peace, from discord to harmony. We pray for an end to violence and the reign of your shalom for all people.

We share your sorrow at the tragic loss of human life: sailors and soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for the welfare of others; people of faith desiring to commune with you and one another in sacred community. We pray for renewed spirits of many who continue picking up the pieces of their lives after disaster or violence or personal crisis. Lead them to break through the chaos into fresh possibilities.

Walk with one who feels anxious and longs to know your peaceful presence. Befriend one who feels lonely. Strengthen those who care for loved ones. Guide our children into your paths of peace. We seek your healing presence with those living with health challenges.

We offer ourselves, O God, as stewards of your creation and creatures. Direct our actions that we might persevere the gift of life you have given us and enhance the well-being of those in need. Help us observe the wondrous ways in which you are still at work in the world in spite of the forces which threaten to diminish your power. Point us toward possibilities of new life for us and for others.

We pray in the name of Jesus, uniting our voices together with his, in prayer...

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i Avi Selk, “Please stop annoying this NASA scientist with your ridiculous Planet X doomsday theories,” Washington Post, November 18, 2017.
iv Ibid, p. 95.
v http://www.nwfurniturebank.org/about

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