

[Daniel 12:1-4a\(5-13\)](#); [Hebrews 10:31-39](#); [Mark 13:14-23](#)

The end time is near. The signs are all around us. God is coming soon and you must repent. You must be right with God. Prepare yourself for the kingdom of God is at hand. This is not the usual type of preaching you hear at Epiphany. It is more the sort of thing you might hear from a street preacher or from people who are occupied with reading the signs of apocalypse. This gospel is part of what is sometimes called “Mark’s Little Apocalypse”. It is apocalyptic literature like Revelation. It talks about end-time turmoil and concludes with the warning against false prophets. The ones who are pregnant will have a hard time. Do not turn back and get your coat. Flee! There will be suffering, such as not has been from the beginning of creation that God created until now.

It is hard to hear these words predicting a hard time, a time of anguish and I’m not surprised that people look around this world and think that the end time is near. No one wants to think about things getting any worse than they are. This world can be pretty depressing as it is. Recently, I got an email from a friend of mine after I sent him one of my sermons which I think was about God always being there for us. The email said – “I read your sermon, which I found, hmmm, quite lyrical... mind you I have a number of issues with God in terms of looking after his/her people on earth. When I look at the history of the last 500 years, for example, there is a little to cheer about, particularly for people of color. Curiously, it seems to me that people of the most visible faith (in terms of religion) seem to be the worst off in material, political and social terms. People with the least scruples seem to be ones who get ahead the most in this world. Maybe they might have their just deserts in another world, but in the here and now, they seem to be on top and the expense of others.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this email because I could see his point. What could I say? The words that we will receive our reward in heaven suddenly seemed hollow. I had no words of hope. The world is a messed up place. So many things are wrong.

People are starving and dying of AIDS in Africa. People are starving and dying of AIDS right here. People are homeless. Shootings are increasing in Northeast DC. We are still fighting a war in Iraq. We are still abusing our environment. Cancer and other diseases are still a threat. Where is our hope? How do we keep our hope alive in this time of anguish? The writer of Hebrews must have faced a community who had similar questions as we do, because in our reading from Hebrews, we hear from a preacher who is trying to bolster his community. The preacher asks the people not to abandon their confidence and tells them that they will need their endurance. The preacher encourages them by reminding the people of what has gone before.

The preacher says “Remember those early days after you first saw the light? Those were the hard times! <sup>33</sup>Kicked around in public, targets of every kind of abuse— some days it was you, other days your friends. <sup>34</sup>If some friends went to prison, you stuck by them. If some enemies broke in and seized your goods, you let them go with a smile, knowing they couldn't touch your real treasure. Nothing they did bothered you, nothing set you back.† The people are urged to turn the pages of its own history, to remember the difficult times, and to recall especially how boldly and graciously they responded to those hardships. We too have a history, when we made it through a hard time. We have made it through terrible times when we knew God was with us and we were able to keep going and reach the end. Many of us have those times when we knew that in spite of it all God was at work. We have these times in our world, in our country, in our community and in our lives.

I remember when I was in college in the 1980's and I despaired that apartheid in South Africa would ever end. But it did and one day all South Africans were able to vote.

Archbishop Tutu describes one part of that day in his book, *God Has a Dream*.

“People entered the booth one person and emerged on the other side a totally different person. The black person went in burdened with all the anguish of having had his or her dignity trampled underfoot and being treated as a non-person — and then voted. And said, “Hey, I'm free — my dignity has been restored, my humanity has been acknowledged. I'm free!” She emerged a changed person, a transformed, a transfigured

person. The white person entered the booth one person, burdened by the weight of guilt for having enjoyed many privileges unjustly, voted, and emerged on the other side a new person. "Hey, I'm free. The burden has been lifted. I'm free!" She emerged a new, a different, a transformed, a transfigured person. Many white people confessed that they too were voting for the first time — for the first time as really free people." This description to me has the markings of God's hand at work all over it. A system was changed. People were changed.

In our country, we also have these times to look back on. Just this past week we had the ground breaking for the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr memorial on the mall and we remembered what had been accomplished by this great man and the movement around him. Schools have been desegregated, African Americans can sit anywhere on buses and many other changes in our society have been made. And yes, where we are in this country in terms of race is still not right and many people went through a lot of suffering for the changes that were made, but people heard Dr. King's dream and that dream continues to live on and inspire. God was at work.

In this church community, in the midst of needing money and wondering how we are going to renovate our building, we can remember all those who have come through these doors and said – we felt welcomed here. There are people who have said Epiphany and its people accepted us just as we are. We felt loved and got what we needed to keep on going. Those who started this church to do local mission, didn't have much, but somehow they persevered and what they needed was given. Those who came before us built us this beautiful church and passed on the legacy of reaching out to others.

In our lives, I think that most of us have gone through times of despair and hardship, but sometimes when we look back, we see God at work. We see that Jesus was present helping us to walk through the times of loss of a job, a cancer diagnosis or an addiction. God has promised we shall be saved and at our deepest time of pain, this is our hope. This is what we are to remember. When we look back, we see God at work.

I did reply to my friend's email eventually. I said I had no easy answers but that God has a way of breaking through and that I believed that God was still working in the world. I send him a quote from Bishop Tutu that described the end of apartheid and reminded me that God does prevail against the forces of the world.

Theologian Daniel Migliore writes that Christian faith is expectant faith. It eagerly awaits the completion of the creative and redemptive activity.<sup>ii</sup> One commentary says that "Our hope is like a strong cord – an unbreakable cable – linking us who are in the middle of a struggle to the firm and sure promises of God. Christians do not claim to know how or when God's promises will be fulfilled, but they hold on to dear life to the confession the bold affirmation of the Nicene Creed that we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. ... When we hold fast we are not just holding on to a doctrine and or an abstract idea. We are holding on to the one who gives us hope, Jesus Christ."<sup>iii</sup>

This is not something that can be explained in an essay or an email or even in a sermon. One has to experience holding on to the presence of God. This is why the remembering is so powerful because it reminds us of the times when we did experience that we were holding on to Jesus and the times when God was holding us up getting us through those difficult times. So when you lose hope and the world seems to be crashing down on you. Hold on. Remember the times when you saw and felt God's presence working in the world and in your life. Gather with your faith community and pray for the endurance to hold on to the hope. This is who we are – we are a community who holds on to the hope that God has promised us good things and the hope that God's kingdom will prevail on this earth.

---

<sup>i</sup> Heb 10:32-34, The Message

<sup>ii</sup> Interpretation, Hebrews.

<sup>iii</sup> Interpretation, Hebrews.