

Oct. 7, 2015; Dec. 21, 2012; Apr. 29, 2007; Jan. 1, 2000; Jan. 1, 1000; the year 500 CE; 365 CE; and 70 CE. What do know these dates have in common?

They were all supposed to be the end of the world as we know it. Each of these dates was predicted to be the day that apocalyptic events of one kind or another would bring an end to the earth, humanity, or even the universe. In fact, Wikipedia tells me that there have been at least 160 different dates that have been publicly predicted to be the end of the world, some yet to arrive, including the years 2020, 2021, 2026, 2060, 2200, 11,120, 500 million, 5 billion, and 10^{100} (or a googolplex) years.

These predictions range in origin from fundamentalist groups to climate scientists, to some more well-known names including Pat Robinson, Jonathan Edwards, Nostradamus, Charles Manson, Martin Luther, and also two Popes, a few Church Fathers, and even Christopher Columbus got in on the action with his prediction of 1656. The trouble is, as you may have noticed, none of the predictions has come true. It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.

Well, it may not be the end of the world today, but next Sunday is the end of the liturgical calendar—the last Sunday before beginning the new church year with the season of Advent. In Advent, we watch and wait for Christ to come and recall the events of his birth as a baby in a

manger. But this Sunday and next, the lectionary invites us to consider the end of this story. Before we begin again, we must look to the end.

Mark chapter 13 is known as the apocalyptic chapter of the gospel because of Jesus' strong words about the beginnings of the birth pangs of the end of this age. The chapter is Jesus' extended response to the question that Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask him in private, on the Mount of Olives. They've just come from the Temple, where one of the disciples Ooes and Awes over the large stones and buildings. Jesus is not impressed and replies "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all with be thrown down."

Peter, James, John, and Andrew are curious about this and ask, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

The setting on the Mount of Olives is important as this is the place, located across the Kidron valley, just east of the Temple in Jerusalem, where the book of Zechariah prophecies that the Lord will stand to fight against the nations which lay siege to Jerusalem. In a sense Peter, James, John, and Andrew saying, "Ok, Jesus. You said the buildings will be destroyed, and we're right here where the Lord is going to fight back, so tell us when it's coming and how we'll know, so we can be prepared."

Jesus' answer, however, is probably not what they were hoping for. He doesn't give a time and date. Why not? Because Jesus himself

doesn't even know the answer to their question! At the end of this chapter, Jesus says, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come." If only all those people who have predicted the end of the world had just kept reading, they would have known they shouldn't even try!

Jesus does not have the answer they're looking for, but he does give them the answer they need. As with every question that gets thrown at Jesus, He gets to the heart of the matter, he addresses the need below the surface, and says, "Beware that no one leads you astray." "Many people will come and pretend to be me. They'll pretend to have all the answers and they'll say that you should follow them. You'll hear of wars, earthquakes, and famines. Don't be alarmed and don't be led astray from following me."

The disciples needed to hear this then, and I believe we need to hear it now. With so much happening in our world these days, from promises of easy answers to news of terrible atrocities, it is easy to be led astray in our fear or despair, and in doing so, lose hope, perspective, and faith. How can we not be led astray? How do we stay focused on Jesus?

I believe the charge at the end of the letter to the Hebrews is helpful advice. "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without

wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

In times like these, that “Day” doesn’t seem so far off. But we don’t know the day or time, and these are just the beginnings of the birth pangs. So we must hold fast, not be led astray, provoke one another to good deeds, and *especially* not neglect to meet together. With so much division in our culture, meeting together is so important.

Meeting together as Christians doesn’t mean circling the wagons or burying our heads in the sand, as is the habit of some. This church is not a fall-out shelter where we pass the time until the end of the world. Nor is it an armory where we get ourselves ready to fight and conquer.

No, this church is more like a banquet hall, a place where we meet together, because of and in spite of those birth pangs, to lament and to grieve them, but also to celebrate in the midst of them. We celebrate God for all the good things in our lives. We celebrate God for this gifts of faith, hope, and love. And we gather to celebrate in the Eucharist that death has not won, and that hate has no home here. We celebrate and proclaim the mystery of faith that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

The Episcopal Church does believe that Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and that the Second Coming will be the beginning of a New Creation where all of creation will live in harmony with God and there will be no more pain or suffering. That's one way we believe that "Christ will come again." But never forget that we also believe that Christ comes to us each and every day as we serve others and share God's love, when we pray and break bread together, and when we are alive in the Spirit and therefore fully present to life, the birth pangs and the Thanksgivings.

So even though we don't know the exact date of Christ's Second Coming, we do know that Christ comes to us today. This is the Day the Lord has made--Let us rejoice and be glad in it.