

**Love's Labors Lost?**  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
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**Text: Mark 13:1-8**

The end of the world. What does that mean to you? The end of human history, the cessation of time, the destruction of the life as we know it. The best-selling “Left Behind” series applied a literal interpretation of biblical apocalyptic literature to describe the way the end of the world will unfold, with the disappearance of the faithful in the “rapture” and then the cosmic struggle between good and evil played out in wars, revolts, and political machinations. Some believe the end will come by way of nuclear holocaust. Others have suggested the world will end, not with a bang, but a whimper, the dying cry of an earth destroyed by its inhabitants through slow, but certain ecological devastation. In his recent book *Power Down: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*, author Richard Heinberg describes four possible scenarios for facing the end of oil: the path of continued competition for dwindling resources; the search for a silver bullet that will allow us to continue our consumption levels unabated; the choice to “power down”—involving conservation, sharing and reducing consumption; or the plan of “building lifeboats”—in which people move out of mainstream society, and seek refuge in enclosed communities practicing an alternative way of life. *[the summary of this book was provided by Barbara Rossing in an article entitled “End Game” which appeared in the Christian Century, November 14, 2006, p.24]* Whatever you believe about those scenarios, the book makes a powerful case for paying attention, for thinking about the human part of the creation equation, and our part in preserving or destroying what God has made.

The morning scripture text is concerned with endings. It is an example of apocalyptic writing that we find in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The word “apocalypse” means “to reveal”—in the sense of removing a mask or shining a light in order to distinguish between illusion and reality. Biblical scholars warn against reducing apocalyptic literature to mere future forecasting. Instead, it seeks to place the present moment in an eternal context—to see the big picture, as it were. The gospel of Mark was written mid-first-century, in a time of persecution and extreme uncertainty. Rome had ravaged the Temple, rounded up the followers of Jesus, and threatened the very life of the nascent church community. The author either reinterprets or writes back into Jesus’ teachings a word about this time, meant for consolation, but also as a call to action. Listen for God’s Word to the church in every age, in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, at the first verse. [MARK 13:1-8]

A favorite *Peanuts* cartoon has Sally asking Charlie Brown for help with her homework assignment. “I have to write a report on why we’re here.” Charlie Brown, eyes glued to the television set, fires off a response, “Who knows?” And Sally walks away with a look of relief: “Good; that was easier than I thought.”

Perhaps our smiles are born of recognition. We recognize Sally's question: Just why ARE we here? --though we ask it in different ways throughout our life. Who am I? What am I going to do? How can I connect with others? What difference does any of it make when we're all going to die in the end? Most of the time I'm too occupied with immediate concerns to worry about it much. But hovering around out there on the edges of consciousness are those questions of ultimate meaning and purpose. They break in on our lives at odd and inconvenient times, when we're faced with big decisions or choices without clear answers. The death of a loved one or a personal crisis can provoke the questions. Sometimes they appear, unbidden, in our brains on sleepless nights. Or on birthdays ending with zero.

Can you see how these questions and ones about the end of the world intersect? Whether we focus on the micro-or the macro-level-- the end of the world, or the end of me--- the over-arching question is the same, What is the purpose of life? What evidence can we have that our labor, our love, the work of our heart and hands, matters? Is it bound to go the way of all flesh, down to the grave and lost forever?

I have been moved by the essays I've heard occasionally on National Public Radio called "This I Believe." Jay Allison has collected nearly 20,000 audio essays from Americans—some famous, but mostly ordinary citizens—weighing in on the meaning of life; why we're here; what really matters. Allison comments: "They tend to write about a moment in their lives when their beliefs have been tested, confirmed, changed." A tax accountant in Houston recalled his struggle to find a Christian denomination that would accept him as a gay man. One man told of feeding a monkey on his birthday every year, a form of devotion that a Buddhist monk had promised would bring prosperity. Witnessing an autopsy as part of an anatomy class sparked faith in one person: *I had entered the study of the human body expecting to learn of our concrete physical existence. Instead, I discovered the human body as transitory and fragile, and by contrast, the soul as enduring. This elusive, yet holy, core whispers to me of God.* The essays are as varied as the lives of the authors themselves, and yet some common themes emerge. Quoting Allison again, "They [are] marked by a mixture of fear and hope." [This material from the *New York Times*, 11/18/06] What will be the outcome of our love's labors?

Jesus' end-time comments are prompted by the disciples' awe at the beauty and immensity of the temple in Jerusalem. From their perspective across the valley in the Mount of Olives, the view would have been stunning. Staggeringly large, no expense had been spared in its construction. The eastern front of the temple and part of the side walls were plated with gold. The brilliant white marble and metal work made the temple gleam in the Middle Eastern sun, dominating the landscape. Yet Jesus knew that its splendor was not going to last. Its luminescence would fade all too quickly, very much dimmed by human tears.

Jesus seems to be cautioning the disciples about trusting their lives to less-than-ultimate things, in human enterprise that favors the material over the spiritual, in foundations built on human arrogance. When we imagine we can secure our lives through human things—

be it material wealth, military might, knowledge or power---we will end up short; still hungry, still restless, surrounded by the rubble of the temples we have constructed.

Even religion is not immune to this temptation. When faith cares more for its buildings and systems and orthodoxy than for mercy and justice and love, it goes astray of its holy purpose, and will receive judgment: *not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.* The passage offers no litmus test to determine an authentic faith. Instead, the church is challenged to develop a spirit of discernment, to listen and test its perspectives against the yardstick of Jesus' life and teachings. The text forces us to examine what we as individuals and what we as a church value. Are we building our lives and our church on foundations that will last, that will weather every storm, that will endure to the end?

What particularly strikes me about Jesus' words is that success may not always be evident. Nor does every disaster signal the end. Disciples then and now have demanded signs, indicators, timelines for accomplishment. We tend to judge the significance of our lives by human benchmarks: who has the most.....money...might... membership? *The one who dies with most toys, wins.* Right—but don't ignore the fact that they're still dead. We become vulnerable to getting off track when we make human success the criterion for our choices. Instead, we are called to faithfulness and patience, trusting God for the results.

The first readers of Mark's gospel found themselves in a fearful, chaotic time, when their lives were threatened and their future was uncertain. The players and the worldview have changed dramatically, but still we face similar challenges. Wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines; a flood of worldly discontents. Even if we have little fear for our own lives, we certainly are anxious about the lives of our children and their children. There seems precious little objective data to warrant optimism about the future.

Amazingly, graciously, Jesus points toward hope. There's no denying the reality of suffering. His own death confirms the consequences born of human choices and actions. But through the eyes of faith, we may come to see these sufferings not as death throes, but as labor; an end to one thing, but the beginning of another. Looking at it this way gives new meaning to our work, a different perspective on how we spend our time and resources. Are we helping birth the Kingdom of God, here and now? Are we serving as midwives to God's new day, when justice will reign, when all people will live together in unity and peace?

Today we dedicate the commitments of our lives—the time, the talent, and the treasure we offer to God through the ministry and mission of this church. Money, of course, won't buy you love. But how we invest our money –and all our resources--represents what it is we love, what we believe in, where we locate our highest aspirations and our deepest hopes. May we build this church and our lives on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ. Then our love's labors will never be lost, but will find fulfillment in the Kingdom of light and life.

Dolly Minter recently shared a story as part of her Guild devotions that bears repeating. She told about a woman of faith who had come to the end of her life and asked to meet with her pastor. “I am not afraid,” she said. “But I want you to make sure I am buried with my Bible in one hand and a fork in the other.” The minister replied with puzzlement, “The Bible I understand. But a fork?” The woman explained, “At church potlucks, when it was time to clear the plates, they’d always tell us to “keep your fork”—and that promised earthly delights in the form of cheesecake, apple pie, brownies. I want folks at my funeral to understand that I believe the best is yet to come.”

Friends, let us give thanks to God—not just as we gather on Thursday, but always and in every circumstance, for life in Christ. Thank God for joy and purpose today, and the promise that the best, indeed, is yet to come. Amen.