

## The end has come

Luke 21:25-36

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist  
*St. Peter's in the Park Anglican Church (Hamilton,  
 ON)*  
*Advent 1 (December 2, 2012)*

<sup>25</sup> "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, <sup>26</sup> men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

<sup>29</sup> And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees; <sup>30</sup> as soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. <sup>31</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place. <sup>33</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>34</sup> "But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; <sup>35</sup> for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man." (Luke 21:25-36 RSV)

When I was just a new Christian, a book came out that every fervent Christian was reading. It was called *The Late Great Planet Earth*. In it, the author, Hal Lindsey, made a series of claims. He asserted that the end of the world, the end of the once great planet earth, was about to take place because of the following:

- an increase in the frequency of famines, wars and earthquakes
- a likely invasion of Israel by the Soviet Union, which is the Biblical "Gog", in league with other nations, like China
- the appearance of the 6-member Common Market -- the predecessor to today's European Union -- was a sign that a ten-member European confederacy was going to be formed as a revival of the Roman Empire
- the Temple in Jerusalem was going to be rebuilt within 40 years of the rebirth of the state of Israel, that is, by 1988.

Accordingly, Lindsey wrote, "the decade of the 1980s could very well be the last decade of history as we know it".

This book, and others like it, were stirring and thrilling to those of us who just knew that we were part of something really huge, really important, that was happening in our very day. Along with the burgeoning world of Christian music and film that emphasized the end times, this book clearly had two main goals: (1) To scare the heck out of non-Christians in order to get them on to the side of heaven, and (2) To comfort those Christians who looked around them and saw how bad things were and to comfort them with the assurance that it would soon be over.

Lindsey's book, like most other warnings about the end-times, built on the prophecies of Jesus found near the end of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, including the ones from the Gospel of Luke that we have in our Gospel reading for today. This is the first Sunday of Advent, which is a period that marks our expectation of the Lord's coming, the so-called Second Coming. This is exactly what Lindsey and his fellow writers were looking forward to and warning non-Christians about.

Lindsey's goals, like the many others who have predicted the end of the world, were probably not bad, at least not at the start. As a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, where all of the students had been immersed in this kind of teaching, it was in fact the only way to look at the world that he had been given.

But, it is interesting that the sale of his book predicting the end of the world in his lifetime actually made him an absolute fortune. He may have believed in the imminent end of the world when he began preaching, but when he acquired that fortune, what did he do? Did he disregard it all, like Paul the apostle, counting everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ, and simply knowing that the time was short, there was much work to do? No, he began to invest his wealth in mansions and beautiful cars... things that I would have thought would not survive the end of the "late great planet earth"... but then again, what do I know. And, rather than remain married to one woman, he began to get tired of one after another. Now, some 40 years after the predicted end of planet earth, the Christian prophet Hal Lindsey is married to his 4th wife.

Lindsey's goals were not bad: he wanted Christians to be ready, and he wanted non-Christians to think about how they were living. And, perhaps because of the failings of the human flesh, we can't fault him for being overwhelmed by the wealth that followed.

Nevertheless, he was wrong. Quite wrong. And that's very serious. Because he, like many so-called prophets, misled many well meaning Christians, including me. Perhaps some of you. Because as we know famines, wars, and earthquakes have continued. The Soviet Union has disappeared without invading Israel. The European Union now consists of almost 30 countries, not Lindsey's predicted 10. Nor is there a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. Lindsey's prediction of 1988 as the date by which the Lord would have come, came and went, like all the other dates on which so-called prophets and doom-sayers have predicted. Lindsey still appears on TV, pushing revision after revision of the date for the end of the world.

Lindsey was not the first, and he will not be the last to predict that we are living in the days of Jesus' Second Coming. Various so-called inspired prophets have appeared for hundreds of years prophesying the same. And they all, without exception have been wrong.

So, what are you and I, living in 2012, to think of Jesus' words here and their mis-use by people like Lindsey?

First of all, beware of those who come predicting the end of the world. Jesus told his followers that no one would know the day or the hour, that it would come upon them like a thief in the night. Instead, be prepared, at any hour of the day or night, to render account to the Lord of the life that you have lived.

But, what about Jesus' clear words on the end that is coming, and that he says will have come to those of his generation? What should we do with these words? How should we, living 2000 years after Jesus life, death, and resurrection, understand them? Do they have any bearing on our lives, especially now as we stand at the door of the church's new year for a new cycle of our reading of Scripture, and at the doorway of a new calendar year, 2013? What was Jesus talking about?

First of all, what was Jesus predicting would happen? Second, did it happen, or is it still going to happen? Third, what difference does it make to us?

First, what was Jesus predicting would happen?

*<sup>25</sup> "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, <sup>26</sup> men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luk 21:25-28 RSV)*

For those of you who know your Bibles, you will know that the three Gospels, Matthew and Mark, as well as Luke, contain this prediction. That before the Son of Man comes on a cloud with power and great glory, certain signs will be given. Luke has captured Jesus' words in the most broad way, but Mark has captured them quite vividly and succinctly:

*the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup> And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. (Mar 13:24-26 RSV)*

Sounds very dramatic, doesn't it? How could anyone fail to see this happening?

But, as the church has pointed out since the beginning, Jesus is not actually prophesying something; rather, he is quoting the Old Testament Scriptures in which God tells the prophets about something that is going to happen. Here are the words given to Isaiah the prophet:

*<sup>9</sup> Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. <sup>10</sup> For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light. (Isa 13:9-10 RSV)*

The reason this was happening was because God was punishing the world:

*<sup>11</sup> I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless. (Isa 13:11 RSV)*

But, what specifically was Isaiah talking about? Isaiah is very clear:

*[This is t]he oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. (Isa 13:1 RSV)*

Babylon. Isaiah was predicting that all of this would happen to Babylon. Because it was Babylon that had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and had taken the people of Israel into bondage in Babylonia. Because of that God showed Isaiah that God was going to take Babylon and destroy it.

And that's exactly what happened in 539 BC when Cyrus the Great -- that great Persian king whom you will hear more about this afternoon -- conquered Babylon and destroyed it. When he did, he freed the people of Israel and sent them home to rebuild their land.

And so back to our reading from Luke. Here, Jesus quotes the same prophecy of Isaiah concerning Babylon. But, why? Babylon has been gone for more than 500 years? What possible value does this prophecy have in Jesus' day, 500 years later?

During this church year, you have heard from the Gospel of Mark the whole story of Jesus. You know that Jesus appeared in the wilderness during the preaching of John the Baptist. After John was killed by King Herod Antipas, Jesus left the wilderness and went into Galilee where he began to preach to the people that the Kingdom of God was close. People heard him gladly, because he preached with authority: he healed the sick, he gave sight to the blind, he caused the lame to walk, he raised the dead, and he preached Good News to the poor and those in prison. And yet, for all of this, the leaders of the people, ensconced in the Temple in Jerusalem, increased daily in their hatred towards Jesus. Why? What evil had he done? The answer was that he had done no evil, only good. But, he had also embarrassed and shamed the leaders of the people by denouncing them as being more concerned about themselves than about their people, the Lord's flock: they were ripping off the people, ignoring their needs, ingratiating themselves with the Roman army of occupation. So evil and so heinous had their deeds become that the Temple in which they served, a Temple that was meant to be God's holy house, a place of prayer for all nations, had become a den of thieves and a swear-word among the nations. It had become an abomination, no better than the idolatrous temples of any of the surrounding nations, except for one thing... it was supposed to have been different. It was supposed to have been a light to the nations and the hope for God's people Israel. Now it was fit only for destruction... like the great city of Babylon that had gone before it, or like the great empire of Egypt, both of which were destroyed by God for the way that they had treated God's faithful people.

So, now can you see why Jesus quotes Isaiah's prophecy? Can you see now what Jesus is talking about when he says

*<sup>25</sup> "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, <sup>26</sup> men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*  
(Luk 21:25-28 RSV)

Of course you can: Jesus is using Isaiah's prophecy of destruction of Babylon because of what THEY had done to the Jerusalem Temple now to refer to what is going to happen to the Jerusalem Temple and all of its corrupt officials because of what THEY have done to what was supposed to be the most holy place on earth, the Temple, God's meeting place with men. And when this happens, when this holy city of Jerusalem and this holy temple of Jerusalem will be destroyed because God has judged it and found it fit only for destruction, then as prophesied by another prophet, Daniel, the Son of Man will come with great glory to rule and his kingdom will have no end. For it will extend throughout the world, and all peoples shall become subject to his kingship.

And this leads us to our second question: did this happen, or is it still going to happen?

Most preachers and prophets who have tried to convince people that Jesus is coming in their day try to explain that, no, none of this has yet happened, and it is still going to happen, hopefully in our day. People always like to think that the "next big thing" is happening right now and that we will be participants, or at least spectators, when it happens.

But, the truth is my friends, that this event did happen and furthermore it happened within the life-span of some of those who heard Jesus. Less than 40 years after Jesus began his ministry, after the Jews had tried to fight against the Roman army of occupation and remove them from their land, the Romans entered the holy city of Jerusalem and razed it to the ground, including the Temple, which was burned and dismantled stone by stone, leaving only one single foundation wall remaining, the Western wall, as a reminder of the greatness that had once been. That happened in the year 70.

By that year, the Gospel had begun to spread throughout the Mediterranean. But, after that year, the Gospel spread throughout the whole known earth, across the lands that had once belonged to the Babylonians, and the Persians, in fact, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Wherever the Gospel spread, people were converted, and there was opposition; lives were changed, and enemies of the Gospel sought to keep it from spreading further. Within another 40 years after AD 70, the Gospel had spread throughout the whole known world, from the edges of the Atlantic to the shores of the Pacific. And as new lands were discovered, the Gospel reached there, too. The Son of man had indeed come to have "dominion and glory and kingdom" so "that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall

not be destroyed.”

My friends, we are not waiting for the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds. He has come and he has and continues to make the kingdoms of this earth, his Kingdom, the Kingdom of God. The question is: are you a part of that?

And that is our third, and final question: are you a part of the reign of Christ, or are you still sitting around as if nothing had yet happened, but hopefully it will in our day?

I'm sure that some of you are probably surprised to hear me announce to you that something that you had thought had not happened has indeed happened and that it happened many centuries ago. Your logical question to me at this point should be: well, I don't see the Lord reigning. Why aren't things different?

My friends, I, too, sometimes ask that question, and to my shame, and perhaps to ours, the answer is always the same: While our Lord reigns, we his army often sit around with our weapons waiting for him to give the marching orders, when he already has! It is we who have allowed the enemies of the Gospel, including the enemy himself, Satan, to stop our ears to the commands of our Lord and King... in our lives, in our families, in our towns, in our communities, in our countries, in our world. It is we who have allowed the enemy to cause us to fight against each other, brother against sister, Christian nation against Christian nation, like the enemies of the Lord in the Old Testament, scattered in confusion, fighting against each other, rather than going forward fueled by the Lordship of Christ. The horror of wars among Christian nations, including those led by our Anglican ancestors against fellow Christians on the continent or in North America... are scandalous and have caused us to become a swear-word among those who look at us and call us hypocrites. It is only the mercy of the Lord alone that has kept us from experiencing the same fate as Jerusalem, which was destroyed.

And so, what should we do? It is quite simply really. Here is what the earliest church did in the words of Luke, a writer whose words we celebrate today. Here is how the early church lived:

*<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Act 2:42-47 RSV)*

Are you a church in which signs and wonders are done?

Are you a church in which there is no one in need, because all goods are distributed as any has need?

Are you a church in which you all share together at a table, looking each other in the eye, not holding any grudges, and having your hearts filled with thanksgiving for what you have and who you are?

Are you a church that praises God daily, rather than just asking God for new things? And, because you praise God, do all the people of Hamilton marvel when they meet you and ask: what is it that you have that is so special? Tell me, because I'd like to have the kind of life that you have?

If you are, then, you will know quite clearly that you have already cast away the works of darkness, that you are already clothed with the armor of light, and that you want simply to complete the work that he has given you to do and to be received in his arms at the end with the words: Well done, thou good and faithful servant.

Arise, soldier of Christ, the victory is assured, but the war is not yet over. The pioneer and perfecter of our faith has indeed come, and He leads us forward. Will you follow him, or sit back waiting for another?