

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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November 15, 2009
Provocation
Hebrews 10:15-17, 22-25, Mark 13:1-8

Today's scriptures both mention a coming end time. The author of Hebrews writes, "... as you see the Day approaching." And Jesus and his disciples discuss the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Teachings of end times are fairly common in the Bible. Many of the Hebrew prophets and the Greek Testament writers spoke in eschatological and apocalyptic language. Eschatological means ultimate or final things, a final destiny, even an end to a human civilization. But apocalyptic takes the image one notch higher, an apocalypse is an ending that is imminent, usually violent and dramatic, with total devastation.

The Hebrew prophets wrote for centuries warning the people and exhorting them to return to God so that their behavior would not bring about the end times- exile and destruction of their culture and civilization. But from around the second century BCE to the second century CE, the writings became apocalyptic- an imminent, dramatic, and final destruction was coming. Jesus, the disciples, and the early Christian church lived in this time. It was a time of heightened awareness, a time of political unrest and tension, a time of social upheaval, a time of fear.

In our reading from the Gospel According to Mark, we hear a disciple marveling at the temple in Jerusalem, a great structure, not only in size but in what it represented, the religious and political power of the people. Their God lived there! Yet Jesus tells the disciples, “it will be destroyed.” The end times are coming! The disciples understandably want to know when this will be. Jesus’ answer is enigmatic- he does not reassure them, but he does give them something to hold on to. “...do not be alarmed; this must take place...”

Scholars believe that the Gospel According to Mark was written between 65 and 80 CE. This was the time of the Great (and final) Revolt of the Jewish people against the Roman Empire. There had been other revolts, the book of Maccabees tells of one success they had. And there were revolutionaries called Zealots fomenting mini revolts. That is why the authorities could not ignore Jesus when he turned the tables in the midst of the temple during Passover, when the largest number of Jews gathered. But ultimately the people were defeated. The Romans destroyed the temple in 70 CE, and the remaining hold outs at Masada died in 73CE. The book of Hebrews was written shortly there after.

Both of these texts were written as encouragement to early Christians in a time when they had plenty of uncertainty and persecution to provoke them into fear. A time when they believed and really hoped against all hope, that the second coming of Christ was imminent. In these passages we hear advice, hope, and

encouragement. Jesus says, “Beware that no one leads you astray,” And the author of Hebrews encourages them to engage in certain types of behavior, “... all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

In our everyday lives we get messages from all around us. Some are discouraging, some are disheartening, and some are even frightening. I won't go into detail: all I need to say is dwindling membership, the economy, real estate unemployment, pensions, war. We could see ourselves as a people under siege. We could be provoked into anger and fear, and desperation and fear. We could be provoked into just climbing back in to bed and pulling the covers over our heads.

Yet we are a resurrection people. We are a people of hope. We are a people who recognize the blessings of light that come in moments of darkness. For God is always there.

Jesus said, “Beware that no one leads you astray.” I heard a story the other day about brains and financial experts. Do you know that they can take pictures of the brain that show in color the parts that are working when we are thinking, meditating, or creating a work of art. The brain is a marvelous gift of God when we use it. It appears that when we are doing financial calculations, one part of our brain is very active with bright colors. Yet scientists found that when we are then invited to listen to a “financial expert,” the activity in that area of the brain ceases. We shut down our critical thinking process and simply absorb what the expert is

saying. Scientists speculate this is what causes us to fall prey to less than ethical “experts.” When we shut down our brains and let the “expert” do the thinking for us.

I think this is a cautionary tale for every part of our lives. We do not know everything, but we can always learn, we can always be open to new thoughts and ideas, and we must always keep our brains turned on, our hearts and spirits engaged. There are no outside experts in our lives. We are the experts. We must take responsibility and not be afraid to engage for as long as and where ever we are able in our lives.

When Jesus is talking to his disciples, the words might sound anxious, and he is the expert! But what if he were just reciting a list of things to come in a hum drum tone of voice? “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” What if his intent was instead to say, “Yes, life happens.” Economies fail, unemployment happens, but stick to what I have told you. Remember what is important.

This week I took a trip to Las Vegas and then a few days off. From one perspective it was a disaster. On the way to pick up my friend, I had a flat tire. I hadn't even left town and already I had car problems and was an hour behind

leaving, putting us in traffic. Then my friend got sick and ended up in the hospital. This was dangerous for her and put me alone on the road at night for four hours. Then on the way up to Big Sur, again in the dark alone, but now on switchback mountain roads, I lost a headlight. Finally my drive back occurred on Friday the 13th!

Much easier and simple examples compared to wars, famines and earthquakes. But nonetheless, as they say sssstuff happens, life happens. But focusing on the negative, being provoked into anger, depression, or despair would not have helped the situation at all. Instead, focus on what was important.

We had the flat tire and got help fixing it before we got on the desert road. We sat in traffic, talking together and had a wonderful time. My friend ended up in a good hospital with wonderful staff and she will recover. I had a restful time in a beautiful place surrounded by nature. And I got help from really nice people with the flat tire, the sick friend and the broken headlight. Angels were in our midst. And God is always present whether life brings joy or despair.

There is a poem that I never seem to be able to remember more than the beginning. It starts, "Live each day to the fullest, get the most from each minute of each day..." Ah yes.

When Jesus regaled his disciples with images of the end of times, it was not an apocalyptic message. It was a message of practicality, common sense, and

hope. When you hear of these things, do not be alarmed; this must all happen, life happens. Yes the end of this time, change is coming. This is just the beginning, something new is being born, something of hope, something of promise.

In response, the author of Hebrews encourages us to engage in certain types of behavior, “ all the more as you see the Day approaching.” The author is telling us that instead of fear and anxiety, we are to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. We are to meet together and encourage one another. Even in this time of uncertainty, let us give thanks, let us love and encourage and share the blessings of our bounty with each other.

As we enter the season of Thanksgiving and the celebration of the coming of Light in to the world, let this be true for our church. For something new is being born, something of hope, something of promise. Let us open our selves to this joyous provocation.