

The Answer is Christ

Sermon by Christine Dempsey, preached November 17, 2019

I know that everyone is familiar with the movie ratings, G for General audiences, PG for Parental Guidance, R for restricted. Well, at my house there is another rating: M for mom suitable. When it comes to movies I am a light weight. For me, movies should have nothing bad in them, nothing that would send them into an “R” rating. They should have beautiful music, maybe tap dancing, and a hopeful message. Well, you can imagine that I don’t get to watch a lot of movies, and if they fit on the M list- almost-, my family tells me to close my eyes and cover my ears during the bad scenes. Perhaps my response to the movies is a way to protect myself from the violence and fear of our everyday existence. Just this week, we again are reminded of the uncertainty in our midst with a public impeachment trial, another school shooting, the increasing fear of pandemic, the impending doom of environmental crisis. No wonder I watch Hallmark movies instead of zombie flicks. The very reality of our world is harsh. Life is hard.

For the same reasons I prefer not to watch violent movies, I prefer not to read today’s passage. Its images are violent and fear-provoking. Listen to these words from our passage: earthquakes, famines, plagues, dreadful portents, persecution, betrayal, hatred. These images are vivid and terrifying. And I suspect that many of you, like me, would prefer to skip over this passage. Note, however, that the Revised Common Lectionary does not skip over this passage. There are Christians all over the world reading this passage today. So, why?

Early theologians looked at this text, and similar texts in Mark and Revelation, as a checklist for the end times. They watched for signs in their daily life that they believed matched the list of Biblical events. The destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 or the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in the year 79 would certainly seem to support that interpretation. But, the world did not end. This trend to interpret events in human history as signs of the end has continued to the present. One of my favorite prognosticators of end times was a sixteenth century mathematician, known smart guy, and friend of Martin Luther named Michael Stifel. His prediction was precise right down to the hour. His followers sold everything, gave their belongings away and waited. Of course, he was wrong, and Martin Luther spent the months following the failed prediction trying to restore Mr. Stifel to respectability. Again,

the world did not end. In modern day times, similar prognostications are made sometimes resulting in vigilantism or mass suicide. When we look at these attempts to predict the end of the world, we find a consistent pattern of fear. It is like new movie rating: T standing for terror. However, when we consider the entirety of scripture, we realize that these texts are not here to evoke fear and terror but rather are to instill hope, hope in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Let's look at this passage again, perhaps with new eyes.

First, we have to understand the kind of literature that we are reading. This is eschatological writing or writing about the end times. This type of writing was part of the Jewish tradition. It alerted people to a reality beyond, to a broader sense of purpose in the cosmic order.¹ People reading the texts at this time would have been familiar with its dark and frightening imagery. It was an attempt to draw the readers into a reality beyond what they could experience. It was designed to pull out the fears of the imagination. Perhaps if it had a film rating, it would be the T rating, T for Terror. Using this imagery, Jesus knew that he could draw a distinct difference between the uncertainty of experienced life and the clear truth of purpose. Here, Jesus adopts the language of the apocalypse and uses it to point to God, to bring calm to the storm, and to promise eternal life. As Jesus points out, no matter how chaotic it gets including “dreadful portents and great signs from heaven”, no matter how alone you feel “where even your parents betray you,” Jesus is here.

Second, we have to understand why eschatological language is part of the biblical narrative. Can't the Bible be just a G rated movie of happily ever-after? But, the Bible is the church's memory of God's interaction with the world.² It includes the reality of human joy when human beings have been at one with God's will. But, it also includes the struggles when humans are separated from God. The reality is that our lives are lived in time and understood in time. We ourselves live a story, and it is within the big story of the human timeline.³ It did have a beginning. It will have an end. The beginning is told through the creation stories of Genesis that we are from God and created to be in relationship with God. This

¹ James L. Bailery and Lyle D. Vanderbroek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1992), 127.

² John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1993), 270.

³ See: H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1941).

story, by necessity has an end. This end is reflected in apocalyptic language. It is a vision of the end of the created world, not a historical prediction but rather a sensory-filled description.⁴ So, here, we are flooded with imagery of the destruction of the physical world. It feels frightening, but Jesus reminds us that if we endure in him that our lives will be secure. Paul in his letter to the Romans says it best. “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”⁵

Third, we have to understand what this means for us. Does it mean that we have to live our lives as a T, as if belongs to the movie rating of the Terror? Or does it mean that we have a different calling for our lives? Instead of reading fear into this text and wondering if every calamity is a sign of the end times, we must turn instead to Jesus Christ. Our fear of losing our social status, losing our wealth, losing our loved ones, losing our lives are redefined when we put our trust in Jesus Christ. In living in Christ, we live not to die but to live into eternal life. We don’t spend our days fretting about life’s calamities but instead we focus on seeing life’s blessings. We live into a life that reflects our faith in Jesus Christ and the love that God has for creation.

The question is, “what is our story? Are we defined by Jesus Christ who offers a world where love reigns and hope abounds. If our timeline is steeped in God’s story, we can live into joy instead of fear. Hope instead of despair. Assurance instead of doubt. Eternal life instead of death.

Let me leave you with a story of living into faith in Jesus Christ. My mother grew up on a homestead in south central Nebraska with her brother and parents. There was no electricity in the home, no indoor plumbing. It was during the depression and the family lived day by day. My uncle, on the day of his confirmation at the local church, went to burn some weeds along the ditch. Such clearing was necessary to prepare the fields for the next harvest season and my grandfather thought it was a good task to occupy my uncle for a few hours. The fire did clear the ditch, but it destroyed the haystack too. This is the hay that would feed the animals for the winter. This is the hay that was the life source of the family, and without it, they did not know if they could survive the winter. When my uncle

⁴James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 592.

⁵Romans 14:8.

entered the home, he entered to the ashen faces of the family. There was a heaviness of the reality that the family could not make it through the winter. The gut instinct might have been to blame my uncle or perhaps curse God for such bad luck. With heavy hearts, they still made their way to the church for confirmation that day. When they returned, the haystack had been restored. No one knew who or how but the family knew that they would make it through the winter.

What is your story? Your movie rating? Is it G for General Audiences? T for Terror? Perhaps M, for mom movies. But I think the right answer is C. C is for Christ. Amen