

In praise of the first coming: Sunday, November 19

*Mark 13:1-8*

by [Robin R Meyers](#) in the [November 15, 2000](#) issue

Whenever the text turns apocalyptic, as it does this week, there would seem to be only two choices: either take it literally and join the lucrative doomsday machine of late-night, splendidly coifed Christian psychics, or begin your best apologetic backpedaling—cheered on by Bishop John Spong. If you choose the first option, to be a player in the apocalyptic game, then you too can help frightened people “read the signs.” There is big money in the “End-Times Game,” and what’s more, the deeply satisfying prospect of “Gotcha!”

If you choose the second option, and claim that it’s all just an allegory for the tenacity of hope in the midst of a world gone mad, then what becomes of history’s arc? Of human progress? Of the possibility that suffering itself will one day be redeemed?

Whether it’s Daniel’s bizarre dream of the winged beast and a prince named Michael who “goes by the Book,” or Mark’s “Little Apocalypse,” written after a generation of suffering and perhaps over the rubble of the temple, predictions of the end times and the second coming demand a soul-searching kind of honesty. But that’s seldom what we get.

It’s not hard to understand why human beings long for some sort of judgment day. Life itself passes judgment daily on the notion that anyone is in charge, that good deeds and righteous living provide exemption from mindless tragedy, or that the meek will inherit anything other than a crushing debt and a dead planet. Surely, we think to ourselves, there’s a plan—we may not be able to see it, we don’t know when it will be implemented and we’re not sure what happens to even the score. But, by God, justice demands it!

Besides, Jesus seems to talk about the kingdom in both present and future tense, and a quick look around is enough to convince anyone that the “human race

experiment,” as Mark Twain called it, is either unfinished or hopeless. If it’s unfinished, then what will it look like when it is? Or if it’s a cosmic “irregular,” if we are destined for eternal brokenness, then perhaps the best we can hope for is a salvage operation. Jesus came once. He will come again.

But after 25 years in the ministry, I can honestly say that I don’t believe this. Fred Craddock once said, “Maybe people are obsessed with the second coming because, deep down, they were really disappointed in the first one.”

What’s more, history itself teaches us that when times are bad, eschatology thrives. But when times are good, apocalyptic talk subsides. And this makes perfect sense. How quickly one wishes to “check out” depends a lot on how happily one is “checked in.”

The gospel is saturated with the expectation of both the imminent return of Jesus and some sort of final judgment. But it didn’t happen, and this very fact became the foremost problem of the New Testament.

Jesus tells the disciples to beware of false prophets (against which the church is already struggling) and to not be fooled by “wars, or rumors of wars”—for they do not mean the end has come. Then he uses a familiar image for patience in the midst of tribulation, comparing the present trials to the “first pains of childbirth.”

But what the disciples want to know is the same thing we want to know: How long is this labor? When can we expect “deliverance”? I know, I know, our time is not God’s time, but perhaps there is room to think outside the apocalyptic box altogether, and to be fully satisfied with the first coming.

Can’t we believe that the kingdom both is and is yet to be, without thinking that God will someday slice the film in half, right in the middle of the movie? Or pull the plug on the projector and let a single frame stand still and then melt from the heated lamp of God’s righteous anger? Is an “intervention” the only way to redeem the incalculable suffering of the human race?

I live and work in Oklahoma City. When the Murrah Federal Building was bombed by an antigovernment zealot who believed he was starting the second American revolution, the building “pancaked.” Among those killed were 19 children in a day care center on the first floor. Many of the pastors in this town called them “God’s little angels,” and said that the Almighty, in his infinite wisdom, had “called them

home.”

If one of my children had been among those pulverized, I can assure you that in the presence of such mindless drivel I would have had to be physically restrained to keep from strangling the preacher. Perhaps the same caution, and common sense, should be exercised when preaching about the apocalypse and calculating the date of the second coming.

The magnificent national memorial now built on the spot where the 168 people died senselessly is my idea of the shape of tenacious hope, and hope is the one thing for which there is no acceptable alternative. Maybe, come to think of it, the most difficult thing about faith is how much faith it requires. And my faith tells me that before an anxious church bent Jesus around the shape of ancient predictions, he was content with the lilies of the field.

And hoped we would be too.