

Jesus spoke often about end times. This morning, Mark's Jesus spoke about wars and rumors of wars; nations rising up against nations; about earthquakes and famines. I imagine that many people thought immediately of the more than 125 people murdered by extremists in Paris on Friday when they heard this morning's Gospel. For many Americans, passages like this bring the shock of the 9/11 terrorist attacks to mind. In the days and weeks after that terrible day unfolded, many of our national leaders turned to scripture seeking understanding, as did many Christians and more than a few non-Christians. The same thing happened after traumatic events like Hurricane Katrina, the Sandy Hook shootings or the Ebola crisis in Africa, and I have no doubts that we will hear Christian leaders and political leaders quoting scripture in the days to come.

These occurrences have been deeply appalling and painful. There are others we might consider and there will be more to come. And despite Jesus warning his followers not to be alarmed when we hear of these things, for many people these are among some of the most alarming prospects imaginable.

Thankfully, turning to scripture is fruitful if we do it with care.

And so first, let me tell you a story: A couple of years ago, my family gathered along the Gallatin river just outside Bozeman, Montana, to scatter the ashes of my beloved Aunt and Uncle at one of their favorite trout fishing spots. After a few prayers and a little dinner, the conversation turned to religion, as you might imagine it would with my family. One of my cousins, a fantastic storyteller named Jim, is not what we might call "churched," although he is a devout lover of the natural world. "I really don't have much interest in the Bible," Jim told me, "but," he said, "I have to admit that when you look at what's happening around the world, you can't deny that there's a lot of those 'Left Behind' kind of Bible predictions happening. Scary!"

"Left Behind," if you haven't heard of it, refers to a series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins that are focused on the end of days. These books

have sold more than 65 million copies. Seven of the books have been number one on the New York Times bestseller list. The success of the books has led to the release of four movies and a video game so far.

The stories are packed with conspiracies, romances, violence and Bible verses. They are high-tech adventure stories where the good-guys are born-again fundamentalist Protestants fighting the Antichrist, who is a former secretary general of the United Nations. Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Orthodox Christians, and Jews do not fare well in these stories. Much like another “end-times” author, Hal Lindsey, these stories have been teaching people to see the world from the perspective of a very specific and surprisingly violent interpretation of scripture.

And the “Left Behind” franchise and the Hal Lindsey media empire do not hold exclusive rights to the insistence of exceedingly violent scenarios for the end of the world. Televangelists, radio hosts and megachurches across the United States preach God’s plan as a countdown of status-challenging cultural shifts and intensifying disasters leading to God’s ultimate bloody battle with evil, in which the vast majority of us will, indeed, be “Left Behind.”

According to these scenarios, anyone who favors interreligious dialogue, women’s rights, marriage equality or sex education in schools will be roasted by God’s rampaging rage. The same Jesus who has consistently told us not to fear will apparently return as some version of the Terminator to torch us along with any and all Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, the United Nations, the NAACP, the U.S. State Department, Harvard and Yale, Europeans, Russians and Iraqis, members of the media, secular humanists, and international bankers. Surprisingly, 144,000 Jews will be spared if they accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, which of course makes them no longer Jewish. The state of Israel, which is mostly secular, non-practicing Jews will also be spared, so apparently God will sort of be OK with you if you are a non-practicing Jew inside Israel or a converted Jew outside of Israel, unless you are convert number 144,001.

Well. There are some problems, aren't there? Two headline problems for me anyway. First, I object to the terrible writing. "Left Behind" books are filled with explosions and people suddenly disappearing, but they still manage to be tedious and juvenile. These are the books that have been most responsible for presenting Christianity and our sacred scripture to my cousin Jim and too many others. I can see why Jim has no interest. "Well," another of my cousins offered, "those books do get a lot of people thinking about God who might not have otherwise." And that is true. But it's also troubling.

I'll concede that others may not find the writing as subjectively bad as I do. I'll even grant that they offer an experience that other fiction offers. Like all fiction writers, these authors create an imaginary world in which readers can find new perspectives on their relationship to God through the eyes and experiences of the characters in a fictional, often fantastic new universe with all kinds of possibilities. Fictional worlds in literature or film can provide a sense of comfort or new insights into events and experiences by casting them in a larger, cosmic framework.

I can accept that these stories as fictional. But the interpretation of scripture presented in the Left Behind series or Hal Lindsey's writing is also fictional. And that I cannot accept. Not without offering an alternative. All I could offer to Jim was that there were other ways to read scripture, especially passages like the one we heard this morning. I'd like to offer you a bit more of that alternative.

Mark 13 is often called a "little apocalypse" because Jesus uses apocalyptic language, which is a word-game of sorts involving vivid metaphors and highly symbolic references to reveal God's activity in our world. The word "apocalypse" is simply Greek for "revelation" and it refers to disclosures of hidden knowledge through visions or dreams. The way we choose to read apocalyptic scripture has ramifications for our entire worldview. If we see Mark 13, the Hebrew book of Daniel and the Revelation to John as inevitable predictions about our future, we are looking at prophecy in a way that was invented less than 200 years ago. It

leads to a perspective that is becoming increasingly popular in America—one does not offer much hope for this world.

There is another, more life-affirming and time-tested way to read these scriptures—the way that predominates Christian thought and practice outside the United States; the way that many of us on the list of those who won't make the "Left Behind" cut read apocalyptic writing. You see, prophets in biblical times, were not predictors of the future, but rather inspired voices calling people to repentance and justice. They reminded the people of God's amazing and steadfast faithfulness. They offered not despair, but hope. With that in mind, turning to scripture becomes more fruitful than reproachful.

"You will show me the path of life," we prayed in the Psalm and from the letter to the Hebrews we heard this: "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." In response, we are not urged to condemn. Instead, the author of the letter to the Hebrews encourages us to approach the sanctuary of Christ "with a true heart in full assurance of faith" urging us to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."

We heard Jesus tell his followers to beware, but the Greek word that Mark's Jesus used means to look, to watch. Jesus uses this word frequently throughout Mark's Gospel, consistently linking it with discernment. Jesus closes Mark's "little apocalypse" with the same word. That word can encourage us to look for and recognize deceptions beneath the sensational interpretations of signs and symbols that promote fear and contraction.

So, how, then, shall we prepare ourselves not to be led astray? Martin Luther is credited with saying, "Even if I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today." That is to say, our experience of God compels us, like the prophets who went before us, to offer *hope* in the face of disaster, war and famine. To offer *hope*, yes, even in the face of terrorist violence. Rather than wringing our hands in fear that Armageddon is upon us or that we will fail some divine behavior test, we can act as though we actually trust

the God who has revealed the abundance of God's grace, mercy and goodness to us and to all the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We can obey Jesus and watch with discernment for God's activity right here and right now. More than that, we can teach others how to see God's presence by respecting the dignity of every human, by working for justice, by listening deeply to the hurt of another. We can teach others by living lives that are expectant and hopeful for Christ's return. I heard someone ask a priest when *exactly* Jesus would return. I cannot do better than his answer. "I don't know," he said, "I'm on the welcoming committee, not the planning committee."

The end that Jesus said must come does not have to be an end that is filled with horror, blood and divisiveness. There is greater hope, is there not, in an end that is the final fulfillment of God's shalom. That is an end that can inspire us to care for each other, for those around us and for God's creation while we wait. The end that must come fully in God's own time is God's reign of grace and peace and justice. While we wait and watch, can we not practice giving God's shalom in smaller measure, looking for signs of its coming in fullness? If we do this, we will indeed see signs. And the signs will be people acting as Jesus did.

Even here. Even now.