

Title: Hope that Endures

Subtitle: A realistic and practical view of end-time events.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/Mu8linuYZhg?si=WP-mDj-CVAJz7Lo6>

Today's Gospel is full of troubling images: wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, and famines, and these are just the beginning of birth pangs. So, if you came to church today longing to hear from one of the "Be Happy" passages of the Bible, you have come on the wrong Sunday. But there is much that we need to learn from texts like these so that when hard times come, we will not be unprepared and overwhelmed.

As someone who admits to having an optimistic disposition, I find end-time passages like the one assigned today particularly challenging. But as I look back over my life, I have come to realize I have learned more from difficult and trying times than I ever have compared to when life went my way.

Therefore, I want to share three life-changing, apocalyptic like events that turned my world upside-down and offer insights from them on how to handle traumatic events.

The first was 9/11. At first, my reaction was to let myself get paralyzed in front of the TV set as the scenes were replayed over and over again. But I remember pushing myself away from the TV and calling on my church to pray. We needed each other in that hour, and not only did we come together within our own denomination, but we also got together with other churches, black and white, rich and poor. It didn't matter. And the unity we discovered and had with one another was astounding.

And we resolved to be the church, the hands and feet of Christ to those in need. We wanted to take a role of responsible involvement and not allow ourselves to be passive bystanders consumed with our own distress when so many were hurting.

The second was Hurricane Katrina, in which Ellen and I lost nearly everything. That event taught me that that nothing can separate me from the love of God, and that God is faithful to work all things together for the good for those who love him.

The last of my stories took place this past month as Ellen and I dealt with Ellen's mom, who is 95 years old and is experiencing end-of-life issues. Ellen's whole family system of brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces, and nephews have had to come together to help her make the transition from an independent living environment to an assisted living facility.

As we have walked together as a family through this transition, I have come to realize that there are many parallels with how we are called to view end-time events.

1. Our whole family system was put on the alert and got involved. It was a call to action. Everyone in our more extensive family system got involved and offered something of unique value.
2. Fretting helps no one. There was someone we loved who needed our help, and sitting around speculating about the situation was of no help. Action was needed.
3. Lastly, we all had to deal with unrealistic expectations. For example, Ellen's mom cannot be and do what she once was and did. Even though losing her independence was a tough pill to swallow, it was critically needed, and adjusting to her new reality was necessary.

The thing about expectations is that they are largely assumed. We don't often express or even question them because we think of them as the standard, everyday way things should be. And because we don't question them, they shape how we view the world and our relationships.

The same is true about end-time events. Some may secretly believe that because you are following Jesus, you should have a

carefree life, that your marriage should be without conflict, or that you should have obedient children or have peace in all of your relationships. But those expectations are unrealistic, and life-changing events require a more sober-minded approach to life.

It is easy to assume that the Gospel doesn't "work" simply because life is difficult or because God doesn't answer our prayers in ways we think he should. End-time events are much like earthquakes: they change the landscape of our lives, where everything from that point on changes, and life will not be what it once was. Therefore, we need to "be on our guard"¹ and "stay awake"² when life throws that kind of curveball at us. In the parallel passage in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us, "Don't be alarmed."³ The term means "to wail, to cry aloud," which is another way of saying, "Don't freak out when bad stuff happens." Jesus did what he could to prepare his disciples for this new reality when he told them on the night before he died for them, "In the world, you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."⁴

Therefore, when life doesn't go our way, we must hold fast to the blessed hope that is ours in Christ. Our Collect today tells us that one of the ways we hold on to that hope is when we "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the holy Scriptures. In other words, we need a sober and durable discipleship grounded in the truth of God's word, for it provides a foundation that enables us to stand fast when the day of evil comes.

Secondly, when Daniel was given a vision of end-time events, the scriptures record that he was "overcome and lay sick for some days."⁵ We are all saddened when we hear about the

¹ Mark 13:9

² Mark 13:37

³ Matthew 24:6

⁴⁴ John 16:33

⁵ Daniel 8:27a

consequences of evil in our world, and sometimes, it is too heavy for us to bear. But later in that same verse, we are told that “he arose and went about the king’s business.”⁶ In other words, he overcame that heaviness by taking life one day at a time. He let tomorrow’s worries worry about itself. Therefore, when the world seems to be on its way to hell, shake off that heaviness by determining to do the next best thing. Light a candle. Do something good that makes life better and easier for someone else; for difficult days, always provide service opportunities.

Is this not Jesus’ point in his famous Parable of the Last Judgment? You may recall how all humanity is gathered before the throne of God and then separated into two groups—those who are accepted on his right and those rejected on his left. To those on the right, the judge says: “Come, you that are blessed of my Father, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was naked, and you gave me clothing, sick and in prison and you visited me.”⁷

Here is a shocking declaration: we can make a difference and be the world’s light when darkness seems overwhelming. So let’s be that light. Let’s embrace that hope and make a difference so that others may come “to know the one true God we serve, and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent.”⁸ Amen

⁶ Daniel 8:27b

⁷ Matthew 25:34-36

⁸ John 17:3