

It might have been a questionable choice for the Wednesday Bible Study group to start reading Revelation during the election. I have had more conversations -- let me rephrase that -- I have had more anxious conversations about the Apocalypse in the past couple of weeks than at any time in recent memory. So, while I would prefer to talk to you about almost anything else, Jesus' words to his disciples about end-times seem particularly timely this morning:

“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 birth-pangs.”

In other words, the things that you think are signs of the end, aren't. Wars, famines, earthquakes these are not signs of the end of things, but rather, the sign of the beginning of something new -- “birth-pangs.”

Predictions of the end of the world are a constant feature of life in our time and every time, as it turns out.

Sometime, when you are especially bored, look up “List of Dates Predicted for Apocalyptic Events,” on Wikipedia.

Glancing at this list I couldn’t help noticing that the number of end-times predictions picked up noticeably after the invention of the printing press, again after the invention of radio, and practically exploded once the internet took hold. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell both lost money betting on the end, (Robertson, twice; and let me add, that’s not the only time those two were wildly wrong about something important.)

What does Jesus say about all these end-of-the-world predictions? ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come using my name, preaching that they have the answer about the end.’ And they just keep on preaching it, don’t they? They keep on leading astray.

“End times” is, of course, a staple theme of popular movies. One of my favorites from a few years ago is,

Seeking a Friend for the End of the World, starring Steve Carell and Keira Knightley. The premise of the story is that a 70-mile wide asteroid has been discovered on a collision course with earth and all efforts to stop it have failed. The end *is* coming in 21 days. The two main characters are neighbors in an apartment complex who are thrown together on a journey and try to help one another accomplish the things they think they need to get done before the end comes.

Along their journey they encounter people who are coping with impending doom in many ways. Many are angry and riotous. There are those who just go on living their lives as if nothing is the matter. There are those given over completely to despair, for whom nothing matters anymore. There are the doomsday preppers who delude themselves that they could actually survive the total destruction of the planet if they just dig deep enough. There are the party-ers who think that, if they just party hard enough,

they won't have to deal with the pain of living or the sorrow of loss. There are many ways in which people try to understand and to cope with the end of everything, and the heroes see it all as they struggle to understand and cope with the end for themselves.

[I have to note, I have personally seen many of these same reactions in response to last week's election.]

The Church has struggled to understand "the end of days" from its very beginning. As today's gospel reading makes clear, Jesus' disciples expect that a time will come when God will establish Israel in glory among the nations of the world. Jesus, after all, is constantly proclaiming, as we still do, "The kingdom of God is near." But what do we mean by "the kingdom of God"?

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says plainly that the kingdom

comes within. That's not the kingdom his disciples are looking for in Mark or that voters were looking for in the election booth. But we need to remember that in Mark's gospel the disciples are generally depicted as clueless. If you read today's passage closely, you'll see that they haven't got a clue here, either. "No," says Jesus, "these are not signs of the end, but of beginnings. Birth-pangs."

Every person in this room has experienced a moment when life as you knew it came to an end. We know what it is like to lose a job, or a home, or go through a divorce. All of us have experienced or will experience the death of a spouse, the death of parents, friends, even children. When these things happen, the underpinnings and foundations of our entire world collapses. We experience "the end of the world."

But it is also true -- and those of you who have lived

through calamities like this know this -- that those times in your life were, and always are also birth-pangs of new life.

Of course, we often don't want a new life, especially when we love the old one. So, like the people in the movie, we get angry about what has been taken away, we fall into despair, we try to hoard what we can from the old and defend ourselves from the new, we try to party it all away. All of these are normal and natural responses. We all do all of these things in different ways when we grieve . . . and every bit of it is hallowed and blessed.

The central story of our Faith, the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is the story of complete failure and the loss of everything good ... followed by a new and blessed beginning. This story is important to us, not only because it happened, but also because it is always happening. How many times in your life and in how many ways have you experienced this: Christ has died; Christ is

risen; Christ will come again.

By the end of the movie, the two main characters have both given up on fulfilling their own dreams. They come to realize that the things that have always seemed most important to them just aren't going to happen; or, that they might not really be as great in real life as they had been in their dreams. But, having surrendered their personal aspirations, they each devote themselves to helping each other. Because of their devotion to each other, they discover something more precious than anything that ever occurred to them: Love. When, at the last moment, they realize what they've found, it makes the whole frustrating journey worthwhile. Even the 'end of all things' is worth it in their eyes, if that is the price of discovering love.

That's a nice Hollywood ending. But famines, earthquakes, wars, terrorist attacks, political revolutions, the thousand painful endings we endure as the price of death and resurrection, the price of living and loving . . .

Sometime we, like Jesus' disciples, *want* them to be signs of the end because, quite frankly, these constant crucifixions we endure are exhausting.

But we don't end at the cross. We don't end with a terrorist attack or political upheaval. We are called, always, to resurrection, to new life. What some see as the end are always for Christians birth-pangs of the new. St Francis put this way, "It is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."