

Just about every year, it seems, there's somebody predicting that the world will end. A couple months ago it was David Meade. Who was convinced that on September 23rd, a previously unknown planet named Nibiru was going to smash into the earth. Of course, anybody with a telescope could have told you that there is no planet Nibiru, but that didn't stop him.

Before that there was John Hagee and his Blood Moon. Before that the Mayan calendar. Before that Harold Camping. Before that Pat Robertson. Before that Y2K. And before that... Harold Camping again! Why did people keep listening to that guy?

Wikipedia has actually compiled together all of the widely published "doomsday prophecies" and lists a total of 180 such predictions. Dating all the way back to the 7th century B.C., when some ancient Romans believed that the world would end on the 120th anniversary of the founding of Rome. It didn't. And for the last 2,600 years, it hasn't. But that hasn't stopped people from talking like it is.

And, unfortunately, it is Christians who talk the most about the end times. You can't say the word "prophecy" now without people thinking about some lunatic preacher predicting the end of the world. Or, even worse, some conniving author or televangelist preying on people's fears about the end in order to make a buck.

And that's unfortunate. Because, as Lutherans, we have a completely different definition of prophecy than much of Christianity. Whereas the average American hears the word "prophet" and thinks about someone predicting the future, Lutherans use the word "prophet" and mean simply someone who delivers a message from God. Which means that I'm a prophet when I preach a sermon and you're a prophet when you tell a Bible verse to a friend. And we are all prophets whenever we offer somebody God's Word.

Now, does that mean it's wrong to talk about the end times? Of course not. Because God's Word does talk about the end times. Jesus Himself talks about the end times. And what He says is not only true. But, in fact, much of it has already come true. This chapter of Mark that we're in right now is a perfect example.

A little context here: Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and the disciples are admiring the majesty of the city and the craftsmanship of the Temple. You have to remember, these men are not city folk. All but one of them are Galileans. They're country-bumpkins. And a trip to Jerusalem is a big deal for them.

But Jesus doesn't seem interested in admiring the Temple. In fact, He has some rather stunning news for them. It will all be destroyed. There will be famine. There will be wars. There will be persecution. And the Temple will be torn from its foundation.

It's a startling doomsday prophecy. One that would rank right up there with Nibiru and the Mayans if it were made today. The only thing is, it's already happened.

A few years after the resurrection, there was a massive drought in Palestine, along with a huge Jewish revolt, and brutal persecution of the church by both the Jews and Romans. All leading up to a massive Roman military campaign that exiled the entire Jewish and Christian population of Jerusalem from the city and resulted in the complete and total destruction of the Temple.

Every word that Jesus spoke came true. But Jesus also referred to these events as "only the beginning of the birth pains." As a pregnant woman may suffer through a few early contractions and think that the birth is near, only to find that she's got hours upon hours of labor ahead of her, so also the church would suffer some early pains, only to find that we had far more suffering ahead of us.

And that's where we are now. Waiting. Waiting for the sun and moon to be darkened. Waiting for the stars to fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies to be shaken. Waiting for the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, to return as He left us: descending on the clouds with power and glory, His followers looking up at Him expectantly.

Beyond that, though, we don't get any answer as to when this will occur. In fact, we are specifically told that the day and hour won't be known and can't be known. By anyone. Jesus spells it out: "You do not know when that time will come." Period. End of story. Don't bother trying to figure it out.

In fact, trying to figure out the date of the end times is exactly the opposite of what Jesus tells us to do here. Because although Jesus gives us no instructions about when this will occur, He does give us plenty of instructions about what to do until it happens.

And what He tells us is that we should treat the coming of the end times like we treat the coming of a new season. For example, we've had some nice weather recently. But it's also been getting colder. The nights are getting down into the 30's. This next week, they're supposed to get into the 20's. The trees will get even more bare. The grass will get even more brown. Until finally, we get that dreaded four letter word: snow.

In the spring, we'll see the exact opposite occurring. And like Jesus talks about in the parable, we'll see trees start to bud and flowers start to bloom. And we'll know that summer is coming. Because that's how seasons work. You don't just flip a switch and go from summer to winter and winter to summer. There's a transition. There are signs that a new season is approaching.

There are signs on the earth right now that a new season is approaching for humanity. There is pain and suffer all around us. There are good people dying and evil people prospering. The world is full of sin. I know it's full of sin because I'm a part of it. You are too.

That sin weighs heavy on every single thing we do. We gather here to hear God's Word and receive his sacrament specifically because that sin weighs heavy upon us. Because we need to confess all that we have done wrong, week after week. And have that burden lifted with the words of absolution and the promise of forgiveness through Christ's Body and Blood, week after week.

And we are overjoyed to receive that grace of God week after week. But wouldn't it be great if we didn't have any sin to confess anymore? Wouldn't it be great to live lives totally free of temptation and guilt and pain?

This world needs to end. That's the only solution to the corruption we see around us... and inside of us. It needs to end. A new season needs to come. But just as I can't tell whether winter is here based on one chilly night or whether summer is here based on one tree budding, I can't tell based on any one sign whether Christ is going to return tomorrow or a thousand years from now.

All I know for sure is that He will return. The signs are there. The seasons are changing. This world is coming apart at the seams. And this generation will not pass away until these things have happened.

Because when Jesus talks about "this generation," He's not talking about any particular group of people. He's talking about this sinful generation. This corrupt generation. This pathetically weak generation. We, as a sinful race of creatures, won't pass away until Christ returns. Nothing will end the sinfulness and suffering of this world accept the salvation of Jesus Christ.

So be on guard. Be alert. Wait. Watch! But watch as a servant watches for his master's return. Watch as someone who has been assigned a task. Entrusted with a great responsibility. Who does not want to let His master down.

And so he works and works and works to complete that task. He doesn't sit on his hands until his master returns. He doesn't spend his time calculating when his master might finally be home, like all these so-called prophets. Because that won't get the task finished before the master returns.

He watches for his master in the best way that he knows how: by working like his master could return any day. By working as one who wants to be found busily completing the task given to him when his master returns.

That is how we are called to be on guard. To be alert. To wait. To watch. We have each been given tasks to complete. We've been given tasks as Christians. To make disciples of all nations through baptism and the teaching of God's Word.

But we've also been given tasks as husbands to sacrifice for our wives. As wives to submit to your husbands. As parents to raise our children with the fear of the Lord. As children to obey and learn. As leaders to guide with humility. As teachers to train with wisdom. As elders to speak with discernment.

We have all been given tasks. So stay busy with the work of the Lord. Let the master find you at work for His kingdom when He returns. Watch and pray that you may not be led into temptation. But instead say with confidence the words that more than one prophet of Scripture said with longing and with hope: Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.