

Every five years or so, we hear about a new group of people who are either patiently awaiting the end of the world, or working hard to pile up canned goods and bottled water, determined to wait out the apocalypse. Don't tell anyone, but I remember spending just a few minutes of New Year's Eve 1999 filling up some old milk jugs with water, hedging my bets that maybe, Y2K might happen after all.

This weekend, a new movie named 2012 opened in theatres. Based on the conspiracy-theory that, because the Mayan calendar ends in 2012, this means that the world will too, 2012 is a two-hour account of the end of the world by natural disaster. I have to say, it seems like a smart thing make the 2012 movie in 2009, giving it (of course) plenty of time to turn a profit. That said, the Mayans failed to predict the demise of their own society in 18th century, so I'm not sure how much stock I would put in the 2012 theory after all.

From Orson Welles' hoax, to the Heavens' Gate cult, people have always seemed willing to believe that the world, as we know it, might really come to an end. Movies like Independence Day and Armageddon have managed to capitalize on this fascination, as humans flock to theatres to see their worst fears actualized in high definition and Dolby surround-sound.

Perhaps this fascination is why we find Mark's gospel today, and other passages like it, so compelling. After Jesus predicts the fall of the Temple, the disciples gather around him, seeking to know when this might happen. Jesus' answer is so dramatic that it almost seems fabricated – as if he is telling ghost stories around a campfire, rather than revealing the truth to his disciples. “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars,” Jesus answers, “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.”

Known as ‘The Little Apocalypse,’ this passage from Mark is lumped together with other similar passages from Matthew and Revelation, used as ammunition for people who would like to predict the end of the world.

What is it that Jesus is really talking about? Is he predicting the apocalypse, a la Hollywood special-effects, complete with horsemen and the like? Is this what the disciples are worried about – whether or not they need to start filling jars with water and digging bunkers – or is it something else altogether?

Sitting on the Mount of Olives with Jesus, the disciples would have been gazing upon the Eastern Wall of the Temple Mount, some thousand feet in the distance. “What great stones!” they remark. Each brick rose nearly 40 feet, weighing up to 100 tons. Carved from stone quarries and dragged by slaves, these stones formed a structure reflecting God’s magnificent glory, but also telling of King Herod’s greed and power. The renovation of the Temple had been one of Herod’s grandest achievements as the Roman king of Israel.

The disciples had heard of a new King – the Messiah, the Son of David, come to restore the fortunes of Israel. An anointed ruler, powerful in every way, set to overthrow the government and to finally guarantee peace under his rule. It is this King who they saw ruling the Temple Mount; this King who they hoped would destroy the government in one final bloody coup. As they gazed upon the stones of the temple, the disciples couldn’t help but remark upon their greatness; for it was these stones which they hoped their King, Jesus, would soon occupy, granting the disciples favored positions in the coming Kingdom.

As the disciples gazed and lusted at the stones and the power they represented, Jesus perhaps was looking beyond the eastern wall of the Temple. For, beyond the temple, beyond Jerusalem’s ancient walls, lay Calvary. Jesus gazed upon the hill where, in less than two days, he would be lifted high upon the cross to die. Jesus’ understanding of “the end of the world as we know it,” in the words of REM, was very different than that of the disciples. While the disciples lusted after power and political control, Jesus understood that the coming kingdom would be something different altogether.

Twenty years ago this week, the world experienced a profound shift.

November 9, 1989 will forever be remembered as the day that the Berlin Wall began to fall, reuniting East Berlin and West Berlin; but more importantly, symbolizing the end of Communism in Europe. From all news accounts, life behind the Iron Curtain was desolate – movies like *The Reader* and *The Lives of Others* are shot almost entirely in greyscale, appropriate for the bleakness of life in East Berlin. For months before that fateful day, resistance to the Eastern Bloc had been mounting – speeches by Reagan, moral pressure by Pope John Paul, and demonstrations of more than half a million people in the streets of Berlin showed that there were cracks in the system. Pressure was mounting, and the fissures were growing wider and deeper. The end of the world as it had been, was near.

And then, one cold day in November, Communism fell without a shot fired. A gate in the wall was opened; the guards pointed their guns to the ground, and East Berlin's citizens began to flood over the top of the wall. While news accounts from the time show angry people going at the wall with pickaxes and hammers, the huge crowd seemed more to erupt into a spontaneous party – it reminds me of the scene from the *Wizard of Oz*, when everything suddenly shifts from black and white into Technicolor, and all of the munchkins come of hiding to begin singing. For months after November 9, as the wall continued to come down, people continued to peacefully celebrate the liberty they had so unexpectedly achieved, as they danced over the rubble of their previous captivity.

As Jesus looks upon the temple, and upon Calvary beyond it, he sees the coming kingdom of peace and joy. The disciples, looking upon the same scene, see a kingdom in which they would hold the power. Neither kingdom would come without a price. Though Jesus knew that, on the other side of the crucifixion and persecution yet to come was the hope and promise of the end of the world as he knew it, he also knew that in order for that promise to come to life, there would be birthpangs. Jesus knew that, like Hannah awaiting her child, we would experience wars and conflict in search of a new tomorrow. The tearing down of the wall – the fall of the temples we have built in search of power and dominion – is not an easy thing. As Christians, we hope for the end of the world as we know it – an end to poverty and suffering; an end to inequality and violence. As we seek the kingdom of God, a kingdom in which the whole earth will dance over the rubble of our previous captivity, may we seek that kingdom only through God’s transforming love and peace. Amen.