

The time of our deliverance is at hand.

You know the liturgical year is winding down when the sun goes dark in the gospel! When the mightiest cosmic forces begin to signal an ingathering and surrender, the eschaton, the end-time, is soon to follow.

The great game of guessing the end starts here: just when will the end-gathering begin, and how can we predict it? The gospel, Mark 13, plays it cool, offering a parable of clues – “learn a lesson from the fig tree” – as well as a disclaimer – “but of that day or hour, no one knows.” The disclaimer is made more emphatic by including the angels and Jesus himself among those who can’t say for sure when the hour will come. This inclusion so shocked the church Fathers that it was used as leverage in the debate against the full divinity of Jesus.

But the point is clear or at least it should be to bible believers: don’t ask when the world will end. Don’t guess and don’t try to outsmart it. When the time is ripe – like the branches of the fig tree – the end will come and not a moment sooner. But the season of ripening is God’s alone to know. If God isn’t letting Jesus

in on it, chances are your name isn’t on the list either. In that case, we would be well-advised to behave as the rabbis used to admonish their flocks, “Let us live each day in a spirit of true repentance.”

Our summer over, the harvest upon us, God is near now, at the door. We envisage St. Mark’s portrayal of the end-times to be about the end of the world, the trials, the omens, the shaking of the heavens, the Son of man coming in clouds with power and glory upon the winds.

And yet, if we take it all so literally, the text has lost its meaning. Jesus said, “I assure you this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” How many generations have now passed?

The trick is not reducing the Word to an historical period. We are to let it speak to every historical generation, including our own. After all, the end-times happen to us all, not only to each of us in facing our own impending death, but to all us together as a generation that will pass into the mist of disappearing ages.

Conceivably, the text is not so much a warning about the end of the world as it is a commentary on living in it. This day, this moment, this life, is the time to bear the fruit. Another year hurtles by. Seize the day. *Carpe diem.*

As our projects and pretenses mount, as our labors and tasks surround us, as our entertainment and doodling while away the time, we may forget the upshot of our lives. It is to love and evoke love, no matter where we may be, from nursing home to classroom. It is to receive with full heart the gift of Christ's once-and-for-all redemptive act. It is to sing, with the psalmist: "For you are my God, you alone are my joy. Defend me, O Lord." It is to welcome the opportunity of each moment, each breath.

Living always with an uncertain hold on existence gives us two options. We can either prepare for another life, a better one, in the world to come, or seek to improve the quality of life here and now. One religious crowd chooses the first; they are apocalyptic, fully expecting the world to end and viewing it as an evil place anyway. Another crowd, which is not religious, chooses the second option. They are secular, or humanist, and we do not mean these to be derogative terms. These are people who use their energy and talents (whether they concede they are God-given or not) to work for a better world. And there is a third crowd, religious in a different way, who choose both options. They think that God calls them to continue his work of creation in time; the finishing is in God's hands, but that does not allow the luxury of doing nothing. They also believe in eternal life, in the completion of human personality and an answer to human striving.

Since we do not know the hour or the day, let this be the hour, let this be the day, let this be the time that we live and die.

In Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Great God Brown*, a man is on his deathbed, and he's very frightened. At his side is a woman who has become something of a

mother figure to him in these last moments of his life. So, she speaks to him as though he were a child, saying, "Go to sleep, Billy. It's all right." And he says, "Yes, mother." Then he starts to explain what he has experienced in life.

"It was dark," he says, "and I couldn't see where I was going, and they all picked on me." The woman then says, "I know. But you're tired now. Go to sleep." And he answers, "And when I wake up?" She replies, "The sun will be rising." Then Billy interrupts and says, in great seriousness, "To judge the living and the dead." And in great fear, he adds, "I don't want justice, I want love." The woman replies quietly, "There is only love." And as he dies, Billy begins to repeat the words of the only prayer he knows: "Our Father, who art in heaven." So let us pray: God of endings and beginnings, no one is lost who seeks to find you. Guide us on the journey of life to the safe lodging of your word. Keep us faithful to you, in season and out of season – for we ask all this through Christ our Lord.

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