“When will it end?” - Stephanie Sorge, 3.17.24

I want to start with a little show and tell. This stole that I’m wearing is a cherished gift I received from Don Allen a few years ago, with the blessing of Susie, who made it. She made identical stoles for her dad and the minister co-officiating her wedding, using a “Corn and Beans” pattern from Emily Gilkeson that hadn’t yet made its way into a quilt. This stole connects me to people I have come to love dearly, and others I have come to love indirectly, who I never got to meet. It’s a symbol of love and hope.

At their best, weddings offer a ritual that honors and blesses a significant life change. Something new is beginning, and things will never go back to the way they were before. We all experience these kinds of events in our lives. Marriage. Divorce. New additions to a family. Graduations. A new home. A new job. Loss of a career. A major health event. Birth. Death. Just to name a few. All of these are endings and beginnings, and when we have the space and invitation to recognize them in the context of community, it is a gift.

It’s a gift Susie wasn’t sure she would have. In the days leading up to her wedding, the whole world changed, on 9/11. Many of us can remember exactly where we were, and how we felt as the day unfolded. I had just moved to Massachusetts to start my new job as a campus organizer. After weeks of training, I hit the ground running. We came skidding to a halt when our director called us back to the office for the day. As we sat watching the news, we knew that the world as we knew it was ending, and nothing would ever be the same again.

If we had been following the Narrative Lectionary four years ago, we would have come to this apocalyptic text in March of 2020. Speaking of life-changing events, on March 12th, the church house was packed for Challace McMillin’s funeral. Two days later, on her birthday, I officiated my sister’s wedding. Both events were reshaped by what was happening in the world around us. I remember the uncertainty - do we shake hands? Can we hug? Worship was canceled that weekend, and soon, we were staying safe at home to #stopthespread, rationing toilet paper, and trying to figure out when we could resume normal activities. Parents and caregivers wondered when schools and childcare facilities would reopen, and Zoom stocks were soaring. R.E.M.’s catchy 1987 classic, “It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” was back on music charts.[[1]](#footnote-1) I can’t think about the end of the world, including any of these apocalyptic texts, without immediately hearing the upbeat chorus in my head. If the world is ending, at least we’ll go out with a cheery soundtrack!

Though “unprecedented” was the buzzword, some people lived through both COVID and the global flu pandemic that preceded it by a century. There have always been wars, and rumors of wars, and other world-shifting events throughout human history. Those events provide plenty of fodder for doomsday preppers and would-be apocalyptic cult leaders. Well, I predict that on April 8th, the sun will become completely dark - a sure sign that the end is nigh.

Mark was writing around the years of the Jewish-Roman wars, during which Jerusalem - including the Temple - was almost totally destroyed. It must have felt like the world was ending. Those keeping watch, expecting Jesus to return any day, were especially susceptible to being deceived. People pointed to signs, wondering, “Is this it?” Into that future, Jesus speaks. Just wait. And don’t fall asleep!

Well, how long can we stay awake? Mark’s audience was already a generation or two removed from Jesus’s life and death. Did they feel the urgency? Two thousand years later, do we? Are we waiting for the world to end? There are plenty of reasons these apocalyptic texts are hard to deal with. They’re strange, and they feel very far away from our reality.

Until they don’t. There are always times and places when it feels like the end of the world as we know it. Whether it’s in Gaza or Ukraine, or the epidemic of gun violence in this country, or civil wars and political oppression or uprisings, or the escalating impacts of climate change, or… fill in the blank. That’s not even considering the personal situations and struggles that can also feel like the end of the world as we know it. And we don’t feel fine.

Or maybe we do feel fine. We’re aware of everything that’s going on, but a lot of times, we have the privilege of maintaining safe physical or emotional distance. We live in discordant times, and our hyper-connectedness adds to the cacophony of competing tunes. We choose where our attention and energy go. This tension is captured in a poem by E. D. Watson[[2]](#footnote-2): “My Phone is Full of Cute Cats and Dead Children.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The title pretty much sums it up.

As Christians, we profess an eschatology of hope - which is to say, quite simply, we believe that in the end, all will be well. Wars will cease, all of creation will flourish, and humanity will be fully reconciled to God and to each other. If it’s *really* the end of the world, we *will* feel fine. Better than fine. All of us. In case you’re wondering, we’re not there yet. For those who are experiencing various forms of hell on earth, healing, and re-creation can’t come soon enough. But when things are going ok, it’s easy to lose that urgency. Either way, Jesus says: keep alert. Stay awake.

The realization of God’s final reign will be good news for all of creation. If it’s not that - if it’s not the beloved community reconciled to God and all of creation - then it’s not the end of the world. The world keeps going, God keeps working, and so can we. Even when the world as we know it is ending - whether in a personal or global sense - something new is beginning. The suffering that Jesus talks about in this passage is translated in some versions as birthing pains. God is continually doing something new, and if we stay alert, we can be active participants in that transformation.

Four years ago, the world as we knew it came to an end. We were talking days and weeks. Maybe months. Most of us had no idea. We were just trying to get through each day. At the end of March, the CARES Act was signed into legislation. Among other forms of relief, it provided one-time, direct payments, to each person, plus additional funds for those with children. Only it didn’t.

That first round of checks only went to US citizens and others with permanent residency status and social security numbers. It excluded asylum seekers, as well as undocumented residents. For couples and families, if one adult was excluded, the whole household was excluded. A single American citizen could receive $1200, plus $500 for each dependent. A married couple, both citizens, would receive $2400 plus $500 for each dependent. A family of four could receive $3400 in that first round of checks, but if one of the partners was in the asylum process? Nothing. Those who would not receive funds were already the most economically vulnerable, and often the most medically vulnerable, too.

On March 27th, 2020, the legislation was passed, and by April 1st, the Sanctuary House Church here had worked with New Bridges Immigrant Resource Center to establish a relief fund for our most vulnerable neighbors. Thousands of dollars were raised within days. By the end of July, over $90,000 had been raised. That’s what it looks like to stay awake, and remain alert.

It might have looked like a sudden response to an acute crisis, but it happened because Sanctuary House Church had been alert and awake, and was building relationship before the crisis came. These weren’t just “our undocumented neighbors.” It was Oscar, and Fanny and her newborn, and Jose, and Rosario, and when the world seemed to be ending, you all were awake. God was still at work.

If Mark had been written in 2020, predictions about the end of the world would have made sense. The year began with millions of acres aflame in the US and in Australia, where billions of animals died. COVID became a global pandemic, and the pandemic of white supremacy came to the fore when George Floyd was murdered. There was Brexit, and impeachment, and more. It was the end of the world as we knew it, but here we are in 2024.

Neil Gaiman wrote, “The world is always ending, and the end is always being averted, by love or foolishness or just plain old dumb luck.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The world is always ending - as we know it. But because we know this isn’t the way God’s story ends, we can find hope and courage to pivot, even in unprecedented times. Dumb luck might influence the degrees to which we’re impacted by world-ending events, but it’s the foolishness of discipleship, lived out in love for God and each other, that keeps us alert alert, ready to participate in God’s new beginning. May it be so.

1. https://deadline.com/2020/03/r-e-m-song-its-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it-and-i-feel-fine-is-a-hit-again-1202883119/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://edwatsonwrites.com/?fbclid=IwAR3DP-RLU\_N-OyiQdW2SyEoTvfV9MENGLjdJcL1MGFtuOvfMmdRPkiqYyW0 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2047600348941590&set=a.101878350180476 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.notable-quotes.com/g/gaiman\_neil\_ii.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)