

One of my favorite things about Washington DC is the big white buildings and memorials. I love to visit them. I love the vistas looking from each to another. These alabaster structures are beautiful up close and from a distance. And with all of their neoclassical architectural features, they look permanent and unchangeable.

Perhaps that's why movie makers like to mess with them. Take the director Roland Emmerich for example. He's made a number of sci-fi/disaster movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Godzilla* and *Independence Day*. In those movies, famous buildings are never safe. You may remember the iconic scene from *Independence Day* where the alien spaceship blows up the White House with it's energy beam.

Well, Roland Emmerich has come out with a new movie this weekend: *2012*. The premise is that the end of the world is coming in the year 2012, and it's going to be accompanied by lots of destruction. I've only seen the trailer, but amongst many other famous buildings that crumble, the White House is destroyed yet again, this time being crushed by an aircraft carrier that's been washed ashore by a giant tidal wave.

But, of course, that's all computer generated special effects. Real destruction like that doesn't seem possible. I believe that's one of the reasons the attacks on 9/11 seemed so surreal at the time—surely, those kinds of things can't happen here.

Flashback to Jesus' time. In the city of Jerusalem, there was a building as beautiful and as impressive and as permanent looking as any in our world: the glorious Temple.

The Roman historian Josephus saw the Temple just a few decades after Jesus. This is the way Josephus describes it:

“Now the outward face of the temple in its front lacked nothing... It was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays. But this temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow; for, as to those parts of it that were not gold they were exceeding white.”

And Josephus goes on to describe the glory of the temple from top to bottom. He even describes the beautiful vestments worn by the priests.

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson today (bulletins). In v1, we see Jesus leaving the Temple for the last time before his death. But his disciples have their attention on the building itself. They're rubbernecking. After all, they're a bunch of hicks from the sticks. But now they're in the big city. Now they're in the big Temple. And they're overwhelmed by it's beauty and grandeur.

One of them says, middle of v1, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" They're admiring the architecture, the splendor, the massive scale of the Temple.

So to them, Jesus' words must seem harsh and out of place.

Jesus says, v2, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

‘What?’ the disciples must have thought. ‘This beautiful, glorious Temple is going to be destroyed?’ It must have boggled their imaginations. Such a huge, beautiful building could never be destroyed.

Yet, the Temple was destroyed by the Roman army when they laid siege to Jerusalem and annihilated the city about 40 years after Jesus’ time. All of the walls that had been standing on top of the Temple Mount were been knocked down into the valley below, where you can see the rubble to this day. Jesus words were right on target "Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

For his disciples, the fun little temple sightseeing tour had become deadly serious.

Jesus says, ‘Everything you see, this Temple and everything else, will be destroyed.’

v4, the disciples ask the next logical question, "When?" "When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

But Jesus has a broader view than the disciples. He launches into a teaching about an end greater than the end of the Temple. He launches into a teaching about the events that will occur before the end of the world itself. The rest of ch13 is about the Eschaton, the end of the world, and the Parousia, the Second Coming. We just get a snippet of that discussion today.

But the first thing Jesus says, v5 "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray."

In other words, when it comes to the end, don't be misled, though there are many voices that will try to mislead you. Don't follow them. Don't be seduced by the voices of the prophets of doom, even when it seems like the world is coming to an end. Don't get sucked into the hysteria. Don't follow Chicken Little, even if the sky seems to be falling.

v7 "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 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 birthpangs."

The fact is, chaos has been present in the past. And chaotic things will happen in the future. But don't be deceived. Don't be led astray.

After all, predictions of the end have been a cottage industry for centuries.

The ancestors of the Seventh Day Adventists predicted the end would come April 23, 1843. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, predicted that Jesus would return in 1891. In our own time, Pat Robertson said it would happen by 1982.

And there are not just religious prophets of doom, but pseudo-scientific ones as well. In 1910, the residue of Halley's Comet was supposed to poison the earth. Of course, in the 2000 we had not only the supposed Y2K bug in January but the planetary alignment in May that would usher in a new ice age.

And now we have hype about Mayan calendars and 2012 being the end. And I suspect, once 2012 passes, there'll be a new date, and a new chance to be hysterical.

Then of course, there are plenty of other things to worry about that do not rise to the threat level of "the end of the world," but that cause us concern nonetheless: global warming, swine flu, budget deficits, corporate bailouts, gas prices, carcinogens, holes in the ozone layer, the list goes on and on and on. And we spend our time and energy worrying about them.

In this context, I believe Jesus does something very important for us. He provides us a rather heavy-duty reality check. Don't be misled. Don't get sucked into the natural human tendency to get hysterical. Don't waste your life, and your time and energy worrying about such things. Yes, be prudent. But don't be paralyzed.

Chaos and troubles are a part of this world. They are part of this life. But they are not the purpose of this world. They are not the purpose of this life.

Our purpose is to love and trust God during our lives in this world.

We are called to love and trust God. That doesn't mean just on Sunday mornings for one hour. That means with all of our lives. In the midst of epidemics or earthquakes, love and trust God. In the face of deficits or destruction or even death itself, love and trust God.

Our faith is not a magic ticket to help us escape the sufferings and convulsions of the world. We as Christians are called to live in that world. And we are called to place our trust in the living God. Not in buildings covered with gold. Not in buildings filled with gold. Not in things that are temporary, but in the One who is eternal, who loves us, and who will be with us, no matter what.

Do not be afraid. Do not be deceived. Many voices will try to lead you astray. Trust the one voice that will endure.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. James P. Haney V
St. Paul's-on-the Plains Episcopal Church