Time’s up (Mark 13:1-8)

End times call for tall towers of hope. They tingle with expectation.

by Mary W. Anderson in the November 1, 2003 issue

As the leaves fall from the trees and the earth goes brown and bare, the church contemplates the end as well—the end of our lives in death and the end of the world with Christ’s coming. The very idea that there will be an end is threatening to those of us who have pretty good lives and good plans for the future. For those of us who experience life as a roller coaster of ups and downs, on the other hand, or those who experience life as mostly downs, the idea of “an end to it all” may be comforting.

Those among us who are very elderly or very ill think often about the end of our lives. We prepare and put things in order. Those of us who aren’t ill or elderly are busy living in the middle of things. But what if we all needed to prepare for the end?

What if you knew you had only one month left in your life?

- Would you finish up important matters at work?
- Would you travel to a place you always wanted to go?
- Would you pray more, go to church more, do that generous act you always wanted to do for others?
- Would you find ways to leave a mark on the world?
- Would you reconcile a fractured friendship?

By answering yes to one or more of these possibilities, we indicate that in our last days we would be better stewards of all the things God has given us in this life—better than we are now. In the intensity of last days, we would live better, be better. We would be more generous, more focused on the most important things in life. The question is: Why do we need to be under threat of death to be better stewards?

Here’s another “what if.” What if we discovered that our congregation only had one more month to exist? If my congregation only had a month to live, I would want all the members to be together as much as possible. If only for one precious Sunday, I’d like to have everybody listed in our church directory together for worship. If our time as a congregation was almost over, I don’t think we’d have much trouble getting inactive or barely active members and friends to join us. End times have that kind of power.

As members of a congregation at the end of its life, we would also have the great opportunity to decide what we wanted to do with our assets. Provided God or the bishop left that up to us, we would have a few million dollars worth of real estate, cash and furnishings to disperse back into the local community and the Christian community.

How would we decide what to do with the money? We wouldn’t have time to fight about it. We’d have to focus fast and get our priorities straight. What would we support and what would we want our final legacy to be? We could help start a new ministry where none currently exists. Or we could support an existing one, endow scholarships, build a youth center in town or a better shelter for the homeless. We could do so much—if we had only a month left! We could be really great stewards of our resources—if we only had a month to live.

The question is, why is it so hard for our congregations to consider this kind of stewardship if we have another hundred years to live? The Bible’s teaching about the end times reminds us that we have failed to see history from God’s perspective. There is a bigger picture than just the snapshot of our lives. We don’t live in the moment, we live in all of history.

Yes, there’s an impracticality to living as if it were the end when it’s really not. If I knew my life would really be over in a month, I probably would jump on a plane and visit some places I’ve longed to see. But if I’ve got much more than a month, I have bills to pay and obligations to tend. Living as if it’s the end would be irresponsible. But does our best stewardship have to exist only in our imaginings of “what ifs”?

Jesus calls us to do both: to live with the intensity of last days while living our regular lives. He reminds us that we are not ultimately invested in this world, and he liberates us to work with courage, with hope. End times call for tall towers of hope. They call for a lightning-speed reordering of priorities. End times call for alertness,

sharpness. They tingle with expectation. They are times of uncertainty and fear only for those whose faith is thin.

While the end of the world could be millennia away for all we know, and while we expect our congregations to continue their ministries well into this new century, end times are around us. Church historians and culture-watchers tell us that we’re on the edge of an end time for the church’s traditional role in society. But this doesn’t mean things are over. As Jesus said, you will hear of wars and earthquakes and famines, but it doesn’t mean the end is near. You will hear of the comings and goings of institutions and cultures, but it doesn’t mean the end is near. It may only be, Jesus says, the beginning of what God has planned. End times are powerful times pregnant with purpose for those with ears to hear and eyes to see the advent of our God.