

Year B, Proper 28  
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“This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

The Prophet Daniel says, “There shall be a time of anguish, such has never occurred since nations came into existence.” Back to Jesus, He warns of what is to come, “...wars and rumors of wars... For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” And, “This is but the just the beginning of the birthpangs.” And we know maybe more about this sort of thing than the last time we considered these texts together. We’ve had a time these past 20 months.

Big chunks of the Book of Daniel and this little section in St. Mark’s gospel are a genre of literature called an apocalypse. These eight gospel verses are referred to as Mark’s Little Apocalypse. That’s almost cute sounding, “Look at that little apocalypse...”

The intent of apocalyptic literature is poorly understood by both those who love it and those who distinctly don’t. When most of us think “apocalyptic,” it’s the end of the world as we know it, predictions of that demise; the trials and tribulations of those *Left Behind*. That is certainly a popular idea amongst certain Protestant sects, one that has been tacitly accepted by most, maybe especially those who don’t share that worldview. You want to make a bunch of Episcopalians or Congregationalists uncomfortable at a Bible study, just mention the Book of Revelation.

What does the word *apocalypse* mean? (I just gave a clue). \_\_\_\_\_ A revelation. An uncovering. A disclosure. Revelation, the boom is also called *The Apocalypse of St. John the Divine*. Apocalyptic literature is not about predicting anything, but it is rather about showing the reality behind, beyond what we can see. “All that is seen and unseen,” we say that in the Creed every week. We, as Christians, understand that there is a lot more going on than we can see. A lot more.

Apocalyptic literature reveals God's hope in the world, hope in the world especially in the midst of catastrophe and ruination. These stories were told by and for oppressed people. Daniel was likely written during or just after the Babylonian captivity. Israel had been conquered and one good way to control a vassal state is to carry off the educated, priestly, wealthy and leadership classes of a nation. That's the Babylonian captivity. It was terrible for Daniel and his people. Mark was written in somewhere around 70 CE. There was a devastating famine in Palestine in 50. Between 61-2 Vesuvius destroyed Pompey and blackened the skies across the Med; earthquakes destroyed cities. And then between 66 and 70 there was revolt in Israel and the Roman sandal pressed down on their necks, hard, culminating in the desolating sacrilege, the destruction of the Second Temple where not one stone was left standing there upon another. (Jesus' prediction in Mark was already fulfilled at its writing). That is the context of Daniel and Mark, of Revelation. Things were terrible. Terrible.

We know a bit about what it is like to forge ahead when things are terrible, don't we? COVID. Racial violence. Political violence. Wars ending – great! But ending badly – no good. And the ever worsening condition of our environment, particularly the climate and our apparent reticence to agree about how to save ourselves and our descendants. It seems like the biggest accomplishment at the big COP 26 climate summit in Glasgow was an agreement to meet again.

The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to assure us that God's hope is behind human disaster and fear. Not God's hand! God doesn't cause calamity, disaster is not divine pedagogy let alone punishment. God's hope is behind the cataclysm, meaning God is in the midst of these disasters, not causing them, heavens to betsy no, that is regressive theology, not biblical. God is in the midst of it all, here, for us, with us, helping us cope with the loss. The base lesson is that do not lose hope: God is still involved. No matter how bad it seems, you are not alone. For an oppressed people, a shattered people adrift in the world, that hope is life itself.

The moral of apocalyptic literature is very simple: we know who wins – God. Daniel says, “At that time...” terrible things will happen. “But at that time your people shall be delivered...” Jesus speaks of wars and rumors of wars... but... “this is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” Birth is traumatic, it is painful, bloody, dangerous and it is the narrow gate through which all of our lives emerge. Life, Love, God wins.

There are three important lessons that I think are helpful in Jesus’ little apocalypse in Mark. (And it must be important, there are versions of it in Matthew and Luke as well). Someone once gave me a snarky refrigerator magnet with a picture of Jesus teaching, and the caption is “Listen up, I don’t want four versions of this out there.” Actually, when we do find the same story across multiple gospels, that is an indicator that the story or teaching was important to a variety of communities forming the early church.

The first lesson is that what looks permanent, isn’t. Even COVID. Well COVID might be the new normal, but how we are dealing with it right now will end. We will sing again! This is not forever – in fact nothing is! The story starts with the disciples commenting on the temple, “...what large stones and what large buildings!” All is perishing is how St. Paul puts it. Nothing is permanent. What we think will protect us, will not. What we think we can rely on, we can’t. We are not in control. God is *not* writing the screenplay of your life... and neither are you, not in a real way, not in a who-lives-and-who-dies-and-when kind of way at least.

Ask yourself, “what do you count on to keep you safe?” What do you *need* to live? What is sufficient? What will it be like if all of that fails? (And remember, in the end, *everything* fails). What looks permanent, isn’t.

The second is do not be led astray. We, humans are scatty creatures. As distractable as squirrels, so we seek leaders, someone to follow. We need leaders, someone to take on some of the responsibility of being for us, on our behalf. Leaders are necessary it would seem, the only thing worse than repressive government is lawless anarchy like Somalia or

what threatens Haiti. But our willingness to follow bad people is a moral hazard for our species. We are very willing to give a whole lot up, things such as common sense and common decency if not our common humanity, in order to follow some of the people who put themselves up for leadership. Modern history is full of good people making moral compromises because we sought a leader who (we thought) would take care of everything, who (we thought) had our best interest in mind. We are easy picking for false prophets, for charlatans and grifters, for adopting reality TV for realty, for accepting opinions we agree with (and hope are true and want to be true) over what actually is true. We want someone to save us, we want to believe it when someone says “I can fix it!” but that too often melts into “Only I can fix it.” Do not be led astray.

The third lesson is do not be alarmed. Jesus spoke of what was happening as “the beginning of the birthpangs.” What He is saying is that yes, there will be suffering between now and the big Then, but that the suffering is not the most important part of the story. Necessary perhaps, never to be forgotten for sure, but just a step on the road to the Commonwealth of God . I think Jesus is focusing our attention not on the trauma of our present and future, but on the fruits of that trauma. What are the fruits of birthpangs? Life. “This is but the beginnings of the birthpangs.” And after that, is life, is God. So the lesson, the deep spiritual lesson to take into your hearts is do not be alarmed, yes it likely will be hard, devastating hard, probably, we are sure to suffer, but God always wins. Don’t be alarmed. We know how it turns out.

The Bible starts, “In the beginning God...” created the heavens and the earth and the rest of it. And its ending, in Revelation could be summed at, “In the end, God!” The rest of it just gets us from there to here, back to the beginning. “But O! How far have I to go to find Him in whom I have already arrived.” That is a prayer Thomas Merton prayed in *The Seven Story Mountain*. Do not worry. Do not be alarmed. In the end, God wins.

Maybe Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks sum it up best in their skit The 2000 Year-Old Man. You’ve seen it, right? I wanted to play it but I couldn’t figure out the sound or the

copywrite stuff, which is too bad because it is really funny. The skit is basically an interview with a 2000 year old man. At one point Reiner, the interviewer, turns to matter of religion. He asks how it began, religion. The 2000 year-old Brooks tells him that in the beginning, everyone worshipped Phil. Phil. Phil wasn't God, per se, but he was the biggest, meanest caveman around and everyone did what Phil said. "Did you pray to Phil?" "Yes, it was 'No! No, Phil! Please stop, Phil! Phil. Please!'"

"That sounds terrible, not like our God. How did that change?" (I am taking liberties with the story, preacher's privilege). "Well," the 2000 year-old man replied, "one day there was a terrible thunderstorm, and Phil stood out in it because he wasn't afraid of anything. Then a bolt of lightning struck and there was nothing left of Phil but a grease spot. On that day we learned that there is something bigger than Phil." That is the point of this whole sermon, of the apocalyptic writings we have inherited: There is always something bigger than Phil.

In the end, God! When you are in the world, doing the work of Jesus Christ, relieving the suffering of the suffering, preventing that suffering to begin with, giving, giving of the principal, being grateful most for what you have to give, you, you are a manifestation of God in Christ right in that very moment. You make God alive in this world. You are on the side of God and good in that great war in heaven between the forces of life and the forces of death. What looks permanent, isn't. Do not be led astray. Do not be alarmed. We already know who wins: God. AMEN