

Proper 28Bi - November 15, 2015
Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; Mark 13:1-8
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Apocalypse and the Long Haul: The end of a world is not the end of *the* world

Shaken to the core—again—by acts of terrorist violence—this time in Paris—carried out by those motivated by apocalyptic thinking—let us turn to our readings today to seek some solace, some understanding, and some resolve. According to some fundamentalist interpretations of Holy Scripture, there is a certain style of writing that supposedly enables exact end-of-the-world predictions and that prescribes certain actions to help end it all—even though such exact predictions have been made every few years for the past several hundred years! Today’s readings from Daniel and Mark are examples of this style of writing. Other Biblical examples are found in the book of Ezekiel, Enoch, Baruch and the Revelation to John. These are apocalyptic writings. Apocalypse simply means “revelation,” and apocalyptic writing is a literary style in which the writer revealed the substance of certain revelations or visions which had been granted to him or her; which often included a vision of the end of the world, with cosmic upheaval and all sorts of disasters marking the last days, concluding with God’s final vindication or salvation. Despite the mysterious, colorful, horrific, and obscure imagery of these visions, the original readers may have seen in them some picture of recent, present or impending events. The real purpose of the visions, however, was to encourage—to encourage by showing that, however bleak things might look like to the readers, they were in fact ultimately within the reach of God, who would shortly and dramatically vindicate God and God’s faithful people. Apocalyptic as a literary style was a means of sustaining hope and perseverance among a persecuted people during periods when direct reference to their oppressors and their approaching downfall was dangerous or impossible. These writings asserted that present troubles and disasters, far from being out of God’s reach, had actually been foreseen by God and prophesied at some earlier time. The readers were encouraged to believe that if these prophecies of disaster had been so fulfilled, then the prophecies of salvation to come would receive the same fulfillment.ⁱⁱ

That’s interesting; but why are we hearing these readings now, on this Sunday? Well, at this time of year just prior to and at the beginning of our Advent season, this mysterious genre of apocalyptic comes up in our assigned readings—for in one real sense we do live in the last days, insofar as they were inaugurated by the birth and death and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus of Nazareth we had the astounding inbreaking of the fullness of God into human history and God’s creation. In Jesus celestial powers were and are truly shaken; and the ultimacy of the power of fear, ignorance and death are being taken away. That is why these and other apocalyptic passages are read at the beginning of Advent, marking the advent or coming of the earth-shattering Jesus long ago in Nazareth, and as he comes again and again in our lives and fully, and finally on some last Day when God will be “all in all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now we, who have little or no connection at all to persecutions of 2000 years ago that gave rise to these apocalyptic writings; what do we make of these passages? And what,

if any, encouragement or call to responsibility can we discern from them for today? Along with a message that God will have the final word – thank God - these passages are a message to be responsible in the time and place in which we live. In the lifetimes of some here, we have seen some of the physical horror that some of these passages seemingly describe. With the horrors unleashed by the Nazi state, for example, some at the time drew a parallel with, for example, the “desolating sacrilege” described in Daniel (and later in Mark), and the “final solution” of the “thousand year” Reich, symbolized by the omnipresent Swastika, forcibly placed on Christian altars and across burned-out synagogues. And for some, it is hard today not to make parallels between such Biblical images and the many current armed conflicts and acts of terror; or environmental destruction; or natural disasters; or potential nuclear annihilation. And now, as one commentator put it, it’s the “scientists [who] wear the prophets’ mantle now...as they delineate the ominous changes that global warming and human [plundering or] depredations have already set in motion, affecting the weather, the oceans, the very fabric of planetary life. Now science tells us that time is running out.”^{iv} In our day we are faced with the urgent tasks to which we are summoned by the world’s ferment, by present human misery, and by terrifying problems brought about by the potentials of human destructiveness. The solutions to these cannot be put off until tomorrow, or some Final Day—the future of the earth depends on it.

But having said that, we cannot assume that such horrifying events and major crises are signs and portents of the Last days, or that God will intervene in a final way anytime soon. A popular and very serious perversion of religion exists through a misappropriation of these now ancient apocalyptic writings of Scripture by making false correlations with present realities and trends. This has led repeatedly to the false assumption, for example, of assuming certain natural disasters of earthquakes and tsunami, super-storms or epidemic diseases, as well as our human destructiveness - be it environmental or nuclear or through religious wars and acts of terror—are somehow ushering in Armageddon – the Final Battle – followed by Christ’s Second Coming and/or God’s Final Judgment Day.^v To make such a correlation is an arrogant and irresponsible identification of our destructive action with the will and purpose of an all-loving God. Such actions are not of God, nor God’s “plan”, nor are they God’s final word. As Jonathan Schell pointed out in his powerful book “The Fate of the Earth” some 35 years ago, it is not God who threatens us but we ourselves. And extinction by arms or environmental destruction would not be the Day of Judgment. Rather, it would be the utterly meaningless and completely unjust destruction of creation and humanity by ourselves. To imagine that God has purposed and planned such things and is guiding our hands in such action would quite literally be the ultimate evasion of our responsibility as human beings – a responsibility that is ours through and because of God’s gift of free will implanted in our hearts, minds and imaginations.^{vi}

Within the heart of the gospels’ apocalyptic texts we can hear Jesus saying that even if everything seems to be crumbling around us, we should not seek to escape from the present.^{vii} The end of a world is not the end of *the* world. What counts is to stand firm and alert and together, and act responsibly no matter what befalls us. Apocalyptic language is the language of the future, but it only makes sense in the full context of the past and present, and our responsible role within our time. As much as these passages are hot

with language about shortened and final days, they also speak of how we are to bear ourselves through and over the long haul of things. These passages are more a wake-up call to alertness and acting responsibly in the present than anticipating a future that we somehow create or usher in with our mistaken acts.

And so our call to alertness is an invitation to solidarity with all those who groan under the birth pangs of the new creation. Jesus says later in this chapter from Mark's gospel (13:32), "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." So, in the New Testament record, Jesus himself said that he couldn't predict the final days, *and neither should we*. Rather, we are to focus on now, be alert in these times, and participate in God's ongoing mission of repairing the world and restoring right relationships among people and with God's Creation. Since the final coming of the Lord cannot be either predicted or pinpointed or prevented, the best thing for us to do is to remain alert as we "accept fully our responsibility with regard to our times and invest each moment with its full weight of eternity," as the Glenstal Bible Missal puts it.^{viii} We are not mere victims of passing time waiting for the next good or terrible thing to happen. Rather, we are called to be participants in God's presence and purpose, helping to create changed situations for the well-being of others, ourselves, and all of God's creation. In this way, every fleeting moment can be meaningful providing us with more steady glimpses of God's presence and purpose, until Christ will come again and God "will be all in all."^{ix}

ⁱ See also Advent 1A

ⁱⁱ This was all brought together by taking the present and drawing it back to the past, and then shooting it out into the future—these writings worked like a kind of literary archery. So, for example, the Book of Daniel was written around 160 BCE to encourage the Jewish people who were suffering under the Greek tyrant Antioches Epiphanes. But from there, the literary setting was pulled back from 160 BCE more than 400 years earlier to the reign of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, telling stories of earlier suffering and God's vindication of Daniel, and supposedly prophesying from that earlier time, events that readers of the Book of Daniel 400 years later could identify with in their day. And then, it's all shot out to the future to a picture of a final vindication albeit through more pain and suffering. Similarly, our passage in the Gospel of Mark was written at a time of intense persecution in the early church under the reign of Emperor Nero. The persecution of the early Christians, along with the impending destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans in the time of the writing of Mark's gospel—these contemporary events were dealt with in this same form of literary archery. And so, this 13th chapter of Mark, written at a time of intense persecution in the 60's CE under Nero; has the setting pulled back to the late 20's/early 30's CE - some 35 years earlier - under the reign of Tiberius, and set in the context of the time just before Jesus' final showdown with the religious and imperial authorities in Jerusalem. And then it's all shot out to the final future, again to a picture of final vindication albeit through more pain and suffering.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23.

^{iv} Martin L. Smith, "Shaken Powers" in Sojourners, December 12, 2012, p. 48.

^v The decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict which continues to flare up time and again into armed battles reminds me of comments made by The Rev. Jerry Falwell just after the 2006 Israel/Hezbollah war had begun. Here's what Falwell said, "It is apparent, in light of the rebirth of the state of Israel, that the present-day events in the Holy Land may very well serve as a prelude or forerunner to the future Battle of Armageddon and the glorious return of Jesus Christ" When I will look back on the experiences of receiving my little fifteen minutes of fame, as it were, I will remember the time I was invited to debate Jerry Falwell

on CNN during that brief war in August, 2006. Rev. Falwell's interpretation was wrong-headed and arrogant, and I had the chance to share directly with him what I mean by that. First, we must not assume some present irresponsible acts of human warmaking or other political schemes and alignments are the events that draw us to the End Time, and that would somehow usher in God's final Day, Christ's Second Coming, and separate the faithful from others and from the forces of "Antichrist." Secondly, this identification of certain events or trends involving natural or human destructiveness arrogates ourselves not only to God's knowledge (which we simply do not have) but also arrogates us to God's will.

^{vi} Nonetheless, many people still look for events or trends that feed precise predictions of the end time and mistakenly try to correlate present events with those alluded to in these now ancient writings.

^{vii} A number of passages within the apocalyptic literature itself [e.g. Rev. 2:4 and 18:4] call the churches out of this false correlation mindset. Jesus himself couldn't make precise predictions of the last days and even warned against trying – "But about that day or hour no one knows" Jesus says in Mark's 13th chapter (v. 32). And even more so in Luke's apocalyptic chapter 21 (which we will read in just a couple of weeks on the First Sunday of Advent) – which draws from Mark's 13th chapter – we see Jesus indicating no connection between, for example, the destruction of the Temple and the end of the world. The ruin of Jerusalem by the Romans would not mean the close of the ages – this may well be yet a long way off. On the other hand, before the scenes of the catastrophes which will really precede the end of time, there will be great hardships that people will face that will call forth responsibility and endurance.

^{viii} See Gerard MacGinty OSB, ed. Glenstal Bible Missal (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1983). As this wonderful British resource puts it,

"Oh that you would tear the heavens open and come down....' Once again at the beginning of advent, this cry reaches towards God, borne up by the assurance that our salvation has been achieved, though not yet fully worked out. This is because our God is a God who comes, and Jesus Christ is fully involved in this coming: 'He is, he was and he is to come.'...Faced with the prospect of this Second Coming which can neither be predicted or prevented, faced with this lengthy vigil in the night of this world, whose end remains in darkness, the best thing for us to do is to remain always on the alert [and to live in full expectancy of the unexpected]. We must accept fully our responsibility with regard to our times and invest each moment with its full weight of eternity. Above all we should, like St. Paul, never cease to give thanks. But thanksgiving is not an expression of smug self-satisfaction. It is rather, an expression of gratitude to him who is the beginning and end of all things. Christians thus become the watchdogs of the world, a thorn in their century's side, overcoming sleep and igniting hope [and expectancy]. Come Lord Jesus!"

^{ix} 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23