

The End of the World as We Know It: A Sermon for Advent
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Jeremiah 15:5-9; Luke 3:1-17; II Corinthians 5:16-21

Last Sunday Mary [Associate Pastor Mary Jensen] preached to you from a passage in the Gospel according to Mark that is sometimes called Mark's "little apocalypse" [Mark 13]. Somewhat longer or elaborated versions of this passage can also be found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. At the heart of these apocalyptic visions is a conviction that the world is going to hell in a handbasket, so to speak, and that we can only be saved by some drastic divine intervention. In Mark's case, the end time--or the time leading up to this divine rescue operation--will be marked by catastrophic and cataclysmic events. As Mary pointed out last Sunday, by the time Mark writes his Gospel, a number of these events have already taken place.

In other words, the "little apocalypse" in Mark, and those elaborations we find in Matthew and Luke, originate out of a world that is already in great distress. Mark writes about numerous false messiahs and false prophets who will come making bogus claims of authority, some in the name of Jesus. He writes about wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines, persecutions of the followers of Jesus, enmity and betrayal within families that will result in some being put to death. Most of all, he writes about the desecration and destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, an event that we know took place in the year 70 of the Common Era. It is an event that had also taken place once before, in the 6th century Before the Common Era, during the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah had warned of God's judgment in the first destruction of Jerusalem and her temple. Mark writes after that temple has been twice destroyed.

The Gospel that Mark has to proclaim is addressed to a world once again in tumult. It is as if--indeed, perhaps it actually is the case that--the stench of blood and the sting of the smoldering ruins of the temple still linger in the air. He attributes to Jesus the prediction that has surely come to pass--"suffering such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be" [13:19]. But even such suffering does not mark the end: "after that suffering the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken" [13:24-25]. In short, the whole cosmos will be thrown into pandemonium and distress. Then, and only then, the Son of Man will come to gather the elect from the ends of the earth.

Recently I acquired a book with the title *Apocalypse Now and Then* [by Catherine Keller]. The title intrigued me, first of all with its mention of "apocalypse," then later with the phrase "now and then." It occurs to me that maybe we all need a "little apocalypse" "now and then"! We all need to be shaken up with the prospect of a world gone out of control. We all need to go see a movie like "Independence Day" or "Armageddon," just to be sure we do not take our lives on this good old earth too much for granted. Now that the Cold War is over, we wouldn't want to become complacent about other possibilities for the destruction of the world as we know it. Events of this past week in Seattle, as well as here at home, suggest an escalation of concern about the destruction of the environment as well as the material conditions of labor. The militancy of the protest against the World Trade Organization meetings reveals a deep anxiety, at

least on the part of some, regarding the sustainability of human and other life on this planet if we do not make some fundamental economic changes now.

The apocalyptic vision is typically thought of as a vision of end-time destruction on a global or cosmic scale. Interestingly enough, however, the root meaning of the word "apocalypse" does not have to do with either destruction or the end. It means "uncovering" or "revealing". Thus, the last book in the Bible, known in Greek as the Apocalypse of John, is best known to us as the Book of Revelation. The apocalyptic vision is a vision of what is yet to be made manifest, a revealing of what is yet to come. As a matter of fact, however, the most predominant apocalyptic visions have been, like the Apocalypse of John, visions of catastrophe, cataclysm, or end-of-the-world conflagration. The only hope that such visions provide lies in the conviction that the final destiny of all things rests in the hands of God, who will deliver those who are true or faithful from the midst of overwhelming chaos, devastation, and oblivion.

I suspect that there would be a lot more apocalyptic talk and fear abroad in our land today if it felt more like our world was about to dissolve into unrelenting disease or unrestrained violence or unbridled chaos. Here we stand on the threshold of a new millennium--even if it is technically still a year away--and there is little that seems to trouble us more about this juncture in our history than some possibly minor disruptions caused by the Y2K computer bug. It is hard to get "worked up" about the end-times of Armageddon or Apocalypse Now! The closest we get to thinking or feeling that maybe there is something really bad that could happen to us all is when we go to the movies.

There is a major problem with the extreme forms of apocalypticism that many find in the Bible. The problem is that none of their visions have come to pass. After two millennia and more, and the world is still spinning on its axis. The world has known terrible plagues and persecutions, widespread starvation, massive violence, protracted war, and genocide. We are about to conclude a century of some of the worst bloodshed and inhumanity that human history has ever seen, worse even than the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem, but even so, the end has not come. On the other hand, there is also a major problem with the indifference and complacency of those who act as if the world as we know it will simply go on forever. The problem is that there are real possibilities for devastation and chaos in our world, not to mention profound injustices, that could ultimately destroy us all. We cannot assume that just because the horrendous violence and devastation and suffering of the past have not put an end to all that we hold dear, therefore we are safe and the world does not need to be changed.

I would suggest this morning that Jesus taught and preached an end to the world as we know it. The Christian Gospel is not about preserving the world as it is. It is about a change so thorough, so radical, so fundamental, that if we could fully implement his vision, the world would never be the same again. Let's go back and listen to some of the themes that are part of our Gospel text this morning from Luke. The story is about John the Baptist, whose coming prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus. The themes, however, suggest a radical change is on the way.

The first thing Luke tells us is that it happened in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberias, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee. Already a

picture is being painted. The world, as Luke and his readers knew it, is under the control of Rome. Pilate, whom we will later encounter at Jesus' trial and crucifixion, is in charge of the Jews, who have been made Roman subjects. Herod, about whom we will also hear more later, is ruler of Galilee, the region from which Jesus and many of his disciples will come. Luke also tells us that it is during the high priesthood and Annas and Caiaphas, two additional figures who will use their authority to conspire with Roman power to crush the movement that Jesus is about to begin. So the first theme in this passage is one of authority and power, exercised by those who will prove hostile to the alternative rule and way that Jesus' proclaims.

Then Luke tells us about John the Baptist, who fulfills the vision of Isaiah, preparing the way of the Lord: the valleys shall be filled, the mountains shall be made low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth. The end of the world as they know it! A new landscape! All the barriers to God's saving action gone! Now, what is evident is the subjugation of God's people and the oppression of an occupying power, whose legions are spread throughout most of the known world. Then, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

John speaks none too kindly to those who come to him for baptism: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Hard to imagine any preacher today using this as an "altar call"! The point is that no religious rite will save them. Neither will their heritage or tradition. They must not say to themselves that they have Abraham as their father. God can raise up from the stones new children to Abraham. "Even now," says John, "the ax is lying at the root of the tree." The end of the world as they know it! Religious ritual and ancestry will no longer matter. If the tree does not bear good fruit, it will be cut down.

"What then should we do?" the crowds want to know. After such dire warning, we might think that John will call for drastic action. But no; he replies, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." The end of the world as they know it--a world where such sharing is the exception, hardly ever the rule. And to the tax collectors, who were well-known for lining their pockets with excessive levies, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." The end of the world as they know it--a world where those who can get what they can, whether or not they have it coming. And to the soldiers, who held the balance of power and could easily take advantage of those under their control, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." The end of the world as they know it--a world in which might makes right, and those who hold power invariably use it against whomever they control.

Luke says that the people were filled with expectation, and wondered if John might be the Messiah, God's anointed one, who was to come to deliver them from worldly oppressions. John answers all of them by saying that one more powerful than he is coming, one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, one who will winnow them more thoroughly than he, separating the wheat from the chaff, and gathering the one, but destroying the other with fire.

A few years ago the musical group R.E.M. had a popular song, "It's the end of the world as we know it, it's the end of the world as we know it, it's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine." Yogi Berra is reported to have once said, "If we don't make some changes, the status quo

will remain the same." It has been anonymously recorded, "If growth and change are hurting too much, deny them both; then you will come to know real pain." The message of Jesus was a proclamation of God's rule that called for the end of the world as we know it. It was not a call for the destruction of the world, but for its radical transformation. "From now on, therefore," wrote Paul to the church at Corinth, "we regard no one from a human point of view . . . So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" [II Cor. 5:16, 17]

In this season of Advent, pray for the end of the world as we know it. Pray for the end of violence and greed, of wars and rumors of war, of famine and disease run riot, of false remedies and false gods, of hatred and betrayal within families and across our divisions of race and creed and clan. Pray that no one may claim special privilege due to ancestry or religious practice, and that no one will take advantage by means of official status or social power, and that those who have more than enough will give to those who need. Pray that all will have a place at the table, whether it be the table where decisions are made, or the table where meals are shared. Pray for the end of the world as we know it. As Jesus taught us to pray: God's kingdom come! May all flesh see God's salvation! AMEN!