



"Apocalypse Now?"
Scripture – Mark 13:24-37
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, November 29, 2020

It feels like the Apocalypse.

I've heard this sentiment more than once as we attempt to process the dumpster fire that is 2020. This year has been one continuous crisis ... We started off on the brink of war with Iran and — on the home front — mired in a presidential impeachment trial. We watched Australia burn and the Midwest flood and narrowly escaped an asteroid the size of an SUV ... NASA registered it as the closest flyby on record. There have been murder hornets (remember those?) and swarms of locusts in east Africa. And — who could forget? — the Great Toilet Paper Shortage. We've endured economic collapse and unrest in our streets. And, of course, a plague that is raging relentlessly.

It feels like we're living on the film set of the next apocalyptic blockbuster. But one doomed to receive bad reviews ... the kind the critics will slam for dragging on and on and on.

So, now, here we are. We've made it to Thanksgiving weekend; we've hit the homestretch of this disastrous year.

And on this, the first Sunday of Advent — the season when the church waits with expectant hope for the coming Messiah — the lectionary sets before us a vision of the end times. It's a vision of celestial bodies fading to black and stars falling to earth as the Son of Man rides in on a cloud to gather the faithful to himself. Perhaps a fitting ending to the script 2020 has written for us, but this apocalyptic text is the last thing we need.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark is part of a passage scholars call the "Little Apocalypse" because it borrows elements from Jewish apocalyptic texts. Like other writings of the genre, this chapter describes a great, cosmic disturbance as the Lord comes in glory to right all wrongs and restore creation. It details a dramatic *revealing*, which — as it happens — is the root of the word "apocalypse." From the Greek meaning 'to uncover' or 'reveal,' an apocalypse is an unveiling — in this case, the unveiling of God. So, in this "Little Apocalypse" of Mark, Jesus instructs his disciples to anticipate God's self-revelation. "Keep awake," he tells them. Be vigilant; be alert. Sleep with one eye open. For the Messiah will come any day to usher in God's kingdom. "Keep awake," Jesus tells them, "for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn ... Keep awake."

On one level, this is what the parable Jesus tells in this passage is about. Like the master of the house who will return at any moment, the Messiah will come at an unexpected hour. And when that happens, the very cosmos

will announce his arrival: the sun will darken, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from heaven. On one level, the vision Jesus sets before his disciples is exactly the kind of apocalyptic event you'd expect of the last days, when the Messiah will come at last to usher in God's reign.

But, as is so often the case in the Gospels, Jesus is not speaking on only *one* level. There's more to this parable. That much becomes clear as the story unfolds ... In the very next chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples gather at sundown to celebrate the Passover. And, then, Jesus leads them to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he repeats a phrase he'd uttered only two days before: "Keep awake," Jesus tells them. "Keep awake." But, this time, the disciples need *not* wait to see if the master will come in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. For the hour has come for the Son of Man to be revealed.

And, so, the unveiling Jesus describes in the "Little Apocalypse" comes to pass. Not in some future cataclysmic event, but surprisingly — no, shockingly — in the imminent reality of Jesus' suffering and death.

As the hours tick by, Jesus moves closer to the cross: He gathers with his disciples at evening, Judas betrays him at midnight, Peter denies him at cockcrow, Pilate sentences him to death at dawn. And those who are awake — those who are watching for the master at evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, and at dawn — see that the hour has come. God's apocalypse is at hand ... just *not* in the manner we expect. For the moment when the sun fades to black and the sky grows dark is *not* the moment the Son of Man rides in on the clouds, but the moment the Son of Man cries out from a Roman cross. It is not a grand exhibition of power and glory, but a pitiful display of weakness and defeat. At least, that's how it looks in the moment.

God's apocalypse bears no resemblance to the vision set forth in today's reading. And, yet, it's still an unveiling — quiet literally, in fact. For, when Jesus breathes his last, the veil of the temple is torn in two. The curtain hiding the holiest place is rent from top to bottom. God's presence is revealed. According to Mark, this is the moment for which vigilant disciples have watched and waited. It has come *not* at the end of time, but on the cross. Right there, in some God-forsaken place on the outskirts of town. In a place no one would think to search for God. Right there, in the small and broken figure of Jesus on the cross, God is at work, rending to pieces all that would separate us from God.¹

This seems like a great message for *Lent* — for the season when we journey with Jesus toward Calvary, preparing ourselves with every step to confront the cross. But what's it doing in Advent? Especially *this* Advent, when all we want is to make it to Bethlehem. All we want is to kneel before the manger, to cradle Jesus in our arms, to hold tightly to the hope, peace, joy and love he brings. What does the apocalypse of God at the cross have to do with the advent of God in a stable?

Only this ... That God has a habit of showing up when we're *not* on the look-out. When we're *not* waiting at the door, watching from dusk 'til dawn for the master to come. God has a habit of surprising us with good news ... Just as God surprised an unwed teenager in a Podunk town, who — for all we know — was hanging the laundry when an angel appeared; just as God surprised shepherds on the outskirts of Bethlehem who were watching their flock, not watching the skies. God has a habit of coming in ways that the world would deem small, insignificant ... in the dreams of a good man named Joseph who wasn't expecting to be a father just yet; in the flutter of a child leaping in his mother's womb, announcing that the Mother of God had come to visit; in a tiny babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there was no place for his family in the inn. Yes, God has a habit of showing up — of revealing God's self — in unexpected places at unexpected times.

¹ This reading of Mark 13-15 is influenced by David Lose's commentary, "Advent 1B: Small Things."

This was true in days of old — on a cross at Calvary, in a manger in Bethlehem. And this is true even now. We only need to keep awake and watch for God's saving presence to take shape before our eyes.

Have you heard the story about the grandmother who accidentally invited a teenager she'd never met to join her family for Thanksgiving dinner?

Four years ago Wanda Dench sent a text message to her grandchildren to let them know the plans for Thanksgiving. She thought she was texting her grandson. But a 17-year-old named Jamal Hinton received the message instead.

"Who is this?" Jamal responded.

"Your Grandma," wrote Wanda.

So Jamal requested a picture ... *Not* his grandma.

But instead of letting the text chain go quiet, Jamal wrote back. "Can I still get a plate though?"

"Of course you can," Wanda replied. "That's what Grandmas do ... feed everyone."

So, that year, Jamal joined Wanda, her husband Lonnie, and their children and grandchildren for Thanksgiving dinner.

The meal led to an unlikely friendship between Wanda, who is a white Baby Boomer, and Jamal, who is a young black man. And, every year since, Jamal has joined Wanda and Lonnie's family for Thanksgiving.

This year the tradition looked a bit different. Like in so many households across our nation, there was an empty seat at the table. Wanda's husband, Lonnie, died this spring from COVID-19. Wanda and Jamal debated whether or not they could celebrate Thanksgiving at all this year. And, after weighing the risks, opted for a small gathering the week before the holiday. While it wasn't the usual feast — with all the fixings and all the family — it was an opportunity to celebrate an unlikely friendship that has grown into an unlikely blessing.²

Some might call this just a sweet story ... a small act of kindness ... a bit of good news in a year that feels apocalyptic in the worst sense of the word.

But I call it revelation. I call it God showing up in unexpected places at unexpected times ... through small gestures and insignificant acts that turn out to be an enormous blessing.

And, you know, this happens all the time. If only we are on the look-out. God keeps showing up in the small and insignificant, in the ordinary and everyday. In phone calls to friends who might feel particularly lonely during this season of social distancing. In the donations of sandwiches and water to Emmanuel Dining Room. In small sacrifices ... like wearing a mask, like keeping 6-feet apart ... that may have a significant impact. Whenever, wherever we act in love, God is present. God is being revealed.

So friends, keep awake. Be vigilant; be alert. Stand and watch for the unveiling of God. And you just might be surprised by how close God is.

² Danielle Garrand, "Grandma who accidentally invited teen she didn't know to Thanksgiving dinner celebrates 5th holiday with him after losing husband to COVID-19, CBS News (November 24, 2020).

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

"Advent Hope"

Creator God, whose energy fuels the universe and whose love caresses each creature, we give thanks for this special season of the church. Having not yet lost the glow of our Thanksgiving celebration, we embark on Advent with a grateful heart, mindful of the multitude of our blessings all of which have their genesis in you.

In the coming weeks – in defiance of this virus that plays the role of the Grinch – we will purchase gifts, bedeck our homes, nurture warm ties with others, reconnect with long-time friends, contribute generously to people in need, and delight in hope.

Loving God, we give you thanks for expressing your love for us through Jesus of Nazareth, who walked this earth long ago and during his earthly journey endured the hardships and savored the happiness that comes with human existence. He knew heartache and laughter, struggle and comfort, sorrow and joy. Through him, you painted a hope-filled future by teaching us to love our neighbor, to guard against greed, to do everything in our power to make the world more just, and to work tirelessly for the common good.

Mighty God, as Jesus came into the world long ago, we pray that he will break into our lives again and again, to shake us from our lethargy and to awaken us to your presence. Grant us visions of the rich life that awaits us if we live in harmony with your ways.

We pray that Christ will come into our minds to inspire creative solutions to the problems of our day, come into our hearts to generate an eager desire to reconcile broken relationships, and come into our souls to energize our resolve to follow his way, to pursue his truth and to dedicate our lives to what is beautiful and worthy.

Gracious God, during these days of Advent, help us to be attentive to opportunities to work in partnership with you to forge a new future where lies are buried by truth, fears overcome by courage, indifference is surpassed by compassion, and despair defeated by hope.

Now, hear us as we join our voices as one, praying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.