

Sermon: Year B, 1 Advent

Text: Mark 13:24-37

This week, The Economist magazine reminded its readers that in times of anxiety we tend to speak in exaggerated tones. It's common to see headlines these days that announce that our economic situation is "unprecedented", a "once-in-a-century" crisis. Frequent references to the Great Depression have raised the specter that we are teetering on the edge of full-scale global disaster. It would be irresponsible to pass this off lightly. But as The Economist noted, this rhetoric should be familiar to us. It's the same apocalyptic language that was used when the market crashed in 1987 and when the Dot-com bubble burst in 2000. As a prudent warning against our inclination to hyperbole, they quoted the Wall Street analyst Michael Lewis, who noted: "How many times does the end of the world as we know it need to arrive before we realize that it's not the end of the world as we know it?"

We never quite outgrow Chicken Little. When times are good, we tantalize ourselves with end of the world scenarios played out in movies or in books. Speculate about the end of civilization and you're sure to have an audience, whether you do so as a scientist concerned about global warming or as a activist working against nuclear proliferation, or whether you do so as a film maker fascinating viewers with spectacularly violent special effects or as a novelist writing fantasies about the rapture and the final judgment of God and the unfortunate ones who are left behind. There's a lot of money to be gained in dramatic endings. And when times become threatening, the deepest seduction is the conviction that our problems must be exceptional, rising possibly to the level of complete calamity, an end from out of which no new beginnings come.

At first glance, the reading from Mark's Gospel seems to share the same gloom. What is coming, ultimately, it seems to say, is collapse and destruction. And even more ominous; when it comes, it will come swiftly, taking most people by surprise. They will be unprepared, and being unprepared, they will not survive. So the warning goes out. Beware. Only those who stay vigilant will escape the tribulation.

This passage has been variously interpreted. Some take it quite literally, as if, at any moment all this may actually befall us. It's a message, however, that's hard to maintain after two thousand years proclaiming an imminent end. Some seek relief from this fierce interpretation by setting Mark's warnings within his historical context. The Gospel was presumably written during a time of horrendous violence and political turmoil. The Romans were ransacking Jerusalem. And thus, it is reasoned, this short section, known as the little apocalypse, was written to give an early, struggling Christian community some tether of hope. It serves chiefly as a testament to our human capacity to be resilient in the face of even crushing opposition, which is a quality shared with countless other stories told through the ages. "Don't give up." Don't ever give up – a conviction many now choose to wear publicly, donning fashionable colored bracelets that urge a kind of stubborn optimism in the face of all obstacles.

I think, however, that this passage refers to something very different. It refers to something even more extraordinary than the end of the world itself. What it describes is the event of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. "The sun will be darkened... and the powers in the heavens will be shaken," and so it was described in the hour of Jesus' death. He implored his disciples to watch

with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, but they could not stay awake. Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.” And soon enough he was arrested and dragged away. The true suddenness and surprise is that God himself could suffer our death at our hands, and we did not see it. And the even greater surprise is that our attempt to impose an absolute ending, leaving a corpse in a sealed tomb, could be interrupted by the sudden appearance of the master in the locked upper room, who declared, then, the redemption of all evil. When Jesus breathed peace on his disciples what he announced was that in him all endings have come to an end.

In him all endings have come to an end: this is a contention that we pass by too breezily. But this is our claim as Christians, that, in Jesus, God has defeated every form of defeat. Life does not reach its conclusion in our dying. There is no point where it – or we – are finally finished. For God has interceded. And thus, what we can see in Jesus, if we choose to look, to watch and not to sleep, is, exceptionally, the true end of the world as we know it. It’s happened already – two thousand years ago, with such surprise that we are still trying to catch up with this reality.

The word apocalypse comes from two Greek words that mean “from out of” and “what is hidden.” It points to a time of uncovering, of opening, of the disclosing of our future. How interesting that we think it indicates the catastrophe of our end, when, Christianly, it actually means the renewal of all things. Our future, which is coming, is our salvation, not calamity.

Today is the beginning of the Church Year. Reading Mark’s apocalypse is a remarkable way to get started, because immediately we are informed that every day is the material form of God’s grace. All time is gift, because in Jesus all time is being taken in to God’s eternity. Which means that our talk can change, from the fears of teetering on the edge, suffering the tragedy of unchangeable endings to the trust that once begun, beginnings have no endings, for every ending has been apocalyptically changed by its redeeming. This is the first word on the first day of the year and for all time. That’s why, even amid present shadows, we speak of joy in this season.

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