

The 25th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)
November 14, 2021
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Daniel 12:1-3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11-25
Mark 13:1-8

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at www.trinitybend.org.

I wasn't scheduled to preach this morning. If you have a bulletin, you'll see Celine Burke's name listed there. But Celine called me on Friday to let me know she's fighting off an infection. Nothing serious – certainly NOT COVID – but we agreed that out of an abundance of caution she should stay home and take no chance of infecting anyone else. So here I am. ⁱ

Earlier this past week, I thought I had dodged a homiletical bullet. I was happy to let Celine wrestle with this morning's challenging words, the devastations described in Daniel and in Mark. As we get close to the end of the church year, we hear readings such as these about the end of the world as we know it, and it makes most of us – preachers included – a little uneasy.

Scholars refer to these readings as apocalyptic. It's a distinctive genre, so very dark and so very strange to modern readers in so many ways. As one commentator puts it, this kind of writing "feels different, looks different, and sounds different ... for a good reason: it *is* different."

And yet, it seems to me not so very different. Science fiction and fantasy, in so many of its permutations, is a close cousin. The old *Star Trek* TV series was set in humankind's future, boldly going where no one had gone before. And they were going places others weren't at the time, but it was in 20th century America. And we knew it at the time. They were preaching a gospel of civil rights. The cast was multiracial and everyone was equal, regardless of race. They added aliens to the mix, always trying to find ways to work together. Dr. Martin Luther King reportedly said that he allowed his children to stay up past their bedtimes one day a week to watch *Star Trek* and soak in the "dream" of it all.

The *Star Wars* series of films do not imagine some time in the future. They're set in a time long, long ago and in a galaxy far, far away. But from start to finish, they depict our world and the eternal struggle between the "force" for good and all that is evil. The struggle is cosmic in scope AND it's also a personal struggle that takes place within each of us.

Apocalyptic books and movies and TV shows are still very popular. People love "end of the world" stories. I've watched a couple episodes in a new series on Netflix called *Sweet Tooth*. It imagines a dystopian future, a world after a viral pandemic kills most of the world's population, a timely storyline to be sure. Into this world hybrid babies are born part human, part animal – and the question posed by the fantastic twist must surely have something to do with what makes any of us human? What deforms our humanity, and is it a matter of what we look like or does it have more to do with how treat one another?

I think the Bible's apocalyptic writings work a bit like that. Neither Daniel nor Mark were talking about something they thought was going to happen hundreds or thousands of years later. They weren't trying to get us to look for to see if their predictions were coming true for us today. They were talking about what they saw happening as they were writing.

The Book of Daniel was written in the 2nd century BC, during the time of the Seleucid Empire. Antiochus IV conquered Jerusalem and slaughtered Jewish people. It was illegal for Jewish boys to be circumcised, for anyone to possess the holy scriptures. They desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a sow on the altar.

Mark records the words of Jesus, but he was writing a generation later during a later time of crisis. It's not clear precisely when, either as outright war with the Romans was inevitable – and inevitably deadly – or just after the Roman Empire laid siege Jerusalem to quash a rebellion. When 60,000 Roman soldiers broke through the city's defenses, the bloodbath that followed was horrific. Thousands upon thousands were killed. Soldiers marched into the Temple, into the Holy of Holies, and carried off its treasures. They left it all in ruins, "not one stone ... left [t]here upon another, all ... thrown down." ⁱⁱ

These terrifying tales weren't written for us in our times. They weren't predictive of our days, so much as descriptive of Mark's.

And the biblical account wasn't written to frighten anyone. The world they knew was already scary.

We, too, know something of a scary world. We don't need a scary text from the Bible to tell us what our own world teaches us on the regular, that life is more fragile than we may have believed not so very long ago:

- we are beset by a global pandemic;
- we've witnessed the abrupt collapse of democracy in Afghanistan after 20 years of war;
- we watch in dismay the polarization of contemporary America;
- inflation and supply chain issues worry us;
- a changing climate that brings fires to the west and flooding to the east is terrifying;
- and a climate change catastrophe that is too large for the world's leaders to come to grips with is deeply crushing.

Several years ago, following one of many tragedies – a mass shooting I think it was – I came across a poem by Warsan Shire called "What They Did Yesterday Afternoon."

they set my aunts house on fire
i cried the way women on tv do
folding at the middle
like a five pound note.
i called the boy who use to love me
tried to 'okay' my voice
i said *hello*
he said *warsan, what's wrong, what's happened?*

i've been praying,
and these are what my prayers look like;
dear god
i come from two countries
one is thirsty
the other is on fire
both need water.

later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.

The world's pain is ... *everywhere*.

And even apart from global issues, a personal devastation is inevitable for any of us lucky or blessed enough to live long enough. There's no way through life without loss and suffering.

And that's a clue, perhaps, for us. If pain and suffering are universal experiences and none of us are free of them, these readings from Daniel and Mark) may yet speak to our times. If they aren't really about end-times or the end of time, but about our own apocalyptic moments, they might tell us to look for something that is hard for us to see in the midst of crises (big and small).

The disciples ask Jesus for hints about "when" these things will happen and "what" they should look for. I think they're hoping to figure out a strategy for coping with the inevitable crisis. If they can get a bit more information, they may get a bit of an edge.

But Jesus re-directs their curiosity. (And ours, too.)

He warns the disciples against chasing after easy answers and false messiahs. They've always struggled with that. They've always been looking for a messiah who would be strong enough to keep them safe and secure. Jesus is reminding them to cling to what they know about who he is instead.

Surely that is timely still. Don't go chasing after shortcuts and false messiahs who lead us astray.

We have not always been careful in that way. Even the faithful. Maybe especially the faithful. Over the course of 2,000 years, the church has too often been led astray. Christian crusaders marched off to slaughter fellow human beings. Protestants and Catholics prosecuted and persecuted one another. Europeans crossed the Atlantic Ocean, with a papal edict in hand, and "discovered" a continent that was already the home of millions of people. They laid claim to these lands, and then enslaved Africans to work these stolen lands (their ill-gotten gains).

Jesus reminded his disciples – and all who would follow thereafter – to cling to what we know about who he is. He never led anyone down any path, except the path of love: love of God above all else and the love of our neighbors as ourselves ... and I think we have to add love of this good creation, too!

And when all is said and done, after speaking of "wars and rumors of wars," of earthquakes and famines, Jesus says ... "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." This apocalyptic moment is when we start.

The good news is this: these things will happen, but they're not the end of the story. It's not the last word. That's where the good news is. We fix our hearts on the steadfast love of God that helps us endure through every horror beyond our control.

The point is clear enough, I think, to say that beyond those times in life that are full of the absolute worst pain any of us can experience there will be new life, that God is working in us – and through us – to give birth something new.

We don't need to look for something big and splashy. If we are to assist in this new birth, then we are midwives to something likely small and vulnerable at the start. It will fall to us to nurture it, not necessarily with valiant efforts but small gestures that participate in the ongoing work of what God is doing, for God is always about the business of making new futures possible, new futures born of self-giving love, love that cares for this wondrous world entrusted into our care, love that shields the "little ones" among us.

None of us will escape this life without facing end-times, scary times. It's easy to despair when the whole world seems to be falling apart. But Jesus doesn't leave us with that luxury. There's a birth to witness. And we have a part to play.

ⁱ In the NFL, when a player gets injured, it's likely someone will say, "Next man up!" The aphorism fits this situation, I suppose – and I'm the next man up.

It fits today's readings, too, I think. When faced with the worst life can throw at us, it's time for the next man or woman or child to step up and respond with love.

Keeping with sports metaphors, Ken Sandine complimented me after Sunday's service for pinch-hitting. I quipped in reply, "I've been in the lineup before."

ⁱⁱ John Petty @ https://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2012/11/lectionary-blogging-mark-13-1-8.html provides a vivid recap of the situation:

***Background and situation:** Construction of the Jerusalem Temple was begun in 19 BC. The Temple itself was finished in about two years, though work continued on the structure for another 80. The immense complex covered an area five football fields long and three football fields wide.*

The Temple was built by King Herod, known by history as Herod the Great, and known by his many victims as a murdering thug. Though his sins are indeed many, Herod truly was a great builder. The harbor at Caesarea Maritima was state-of-the-art in its day, and the Temple in Jerusalem was thought by many to be the most beautiful building in the world.

The exterior was covered in white marble and gold. One can only imagine the reaction of pilgrims upon first seeing it, especially if they arrived in the morning with the early light striking the front facade. This shining structure would have seemed a fitting place indeed for God's presence on earth.

Many Jews had mixed reactions to the Temple. On the one hand, it held prominent psychological space as the center of their religion and their national life. On the other hand, it was rife with corruption and collaboration with Rome.

At least some of Jesus' massive support among the common people can be attributed to his confrontational stance toward the Temple. (When he is teaching in the Temple, working over the scribes and Temple bureaucrats, Mark says that "the large crowd was listening to him with delight." 12:37)

The Roman-Jewish War began in AD 66 though it had been brewing for some time. Open warfare had been preceded by decades of earlier uprisings. At the death of Herod in 4 BC, for example, there was anti-Herodian and anti-Roman violence all through the region. The Romans had to bring three Legions down from Syria to suppress the revolt.

Uprisings throughout Syria and Galilee also followed the announcement of the census of Quirinius in AD 6. Prior to Jesus, the most widely known Galilean would have been Judas of Galilee who led the resistance to Quirinius' census.

In AD 66, fighting first broke out in Caesarea. In the beginning, the tide of war seemed to favor the rebels against Rome and they had several early successes. In Jerusalem, a provisional government was set up, but never achieved any real stability because of contention between the rebels and zealots on the one side and the clerics and remnants of the aristocracy on the other.

After the Roman siege of Jerusalem failed in the fall of AD 66, the clerics recaptured control of the provisional government, but a year later, the rebels were able to overthrow the priests.

Two specific actions of the rebels say much about their motivation. One of the first things the rebels did was burn the Temple archives which contained the records of debt. (Foreclosure had rendered many citizens destitute. It's not for nothing that Jesus spoke about debt and talked of being hauled before magistrates.) The rebels also overthrew the high priest and elected a commoner in his place. The high priest and his retinue were seen as blatant collaborators with Rome.

Fighting continued between the various factions inside the city even while Rome was preparing for the final siege. The priests forced the rebels back to the Temple precincts, but an influx of rebels from Idumea turned the tide in favor of the rebels.

By late AD 68 and all through AD 69, the rebels maintained an often brutal control inside Jerusalem which was accompanied by increasing religious fanaticism. The rebels expected the intervention of God and the arrival of the Messiah. In the meantime, they expected all Jews to fight with them against Rome.

This apocalyptic fanaticism was given a boost when the Emperor Nero was removed from office in AD 68. General Vespasian, who was conducting the military campaign against the rebels, broke off his attack and returned to Rome in response to the political crisis and the subsequent struggle for succession. Indeed, AD 69 became known as the "year of the four emperors." Eventually, Vespasian himself emerged as emperor.

... Vespasian's son, Titus, returned to Israel with 60,000 Roman soldiers and began anew the siege of Jerusalem. The Romans eventually broke through the Jerusalem defenses and the bloodbath that followed was horrific. Thousands upon thousands were slain. During the course of this bloody melee, the Temple caught on fire and was destroyed.