

A Tale of Two Times
Preached by
Rev. Linda D. Even
United Church of Fayetteville
November 14, 2021

For Reflection:

There's been rumors of war and wars that have been
The meaning of life has been lost in the wind
And some people thinkin' that the end is close by
'Stead of learnin' to live they are learnin' to die

BOB DYLAN

Hebrew Scripture: I Samuel 2:1-10

My heart rejoices in the LORD. My strength rises up in the LORD! My mouth mocks my enemies because I rejoice in your deliverance. No one is holy like the LORD— no, no one except you! There is no rock like our God! Don't go on and on, talking so proudly, spouting arrogance from your mouth, because the LORD is the God who knows, and he weighs every act. The bows of mighty warriors are shattered, but those who were stumbling now dress themselves in power! Those who were filled full now sell themselves for bread, but the ones who were starving are now fat from food! The woman who was barren has birthed seven children, but the mother with many sons has lost them all! The LORD brings death, gives life, takes down to the grave, and raises up! The LORD makes poor, gives wealth, brings low, but also lifts up high! God raises the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the garbage pile. God sits them with officials, gives them the seat of honor! The pillars of the earth belong to the LORD; he set the world on top of them! God guards the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked die in darkness because no one succeeds by strength alone. The LORD's enemies are terrified! God thunders against them from heaven! The LORD judges the far corners of the earth! May God give strength to his king and raise high the strength of his anointed one.

Gospel Reading: Mark 13:1-8

Next Sunday is traditionally known as Christ the King Sunday – a day that marks the end of the liturgical year, anticipates the fulfillment of God's will for the world. However, we typically celebrate it as Thanksgiving Sunday, as we will this year. (In case you are wondering, Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year.) Today's reading from Mark is one of the recommended texts for today. We usually find this one or ones like it as the liturgical year winds to a close. These readings typically include what are variously described as signs of the end times and warnings about how to prepare for the coming of Christ. Let us listen to these words from Mark.

As he [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" ²Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." ³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Meditation: *A Tale of Two Times*

This sermon comes in response to the combined effect of the lectionary and a sermon request. Most of you know me well enough by now to know that I avoid texts like this as though they were the plague (or perhaps a little apocalypse). I particularly avoid texts which it is my impression have been misquoted, otherwise abused, or so co-opted by the culture as to be unredeemable. To test my perception about this one, I googled a few terms: "Biblical Apocalypse" yielded 8,420,000 hits; *Apocalypse Now*, the title of what many consider to be the finest American film ever made – 12,500,000 hits. "Zombie Apocalypse" should go without mentioning, but unfortunately it garnered 7,800,000 hits. Perhaps more frightening, the Wikipedia article describing the development of the images of a "zombie apocalypse" is, without a doubt, the longest Wikipedia article I have ever seen. I opted not to google terms I consider sub-genres of apocalyptic literature—all the dystopic tales so popular in TV, cinema and games. (Oh, to be the IT archeologist of my search history.)

Any guesses on how often the word "apocalypse" appears in the Greek Scriptures? *Apokalypsis*, translated "revelation" – literally meaning "uncovering"—twelve to eighteen times, depending on who is counting. The "uncovering" referred to an image, dream or vision that could not have been discerned were it not for a revelation by God. Only once is that word used in the book we refer to as *Revelation* in the first sentence and from which history created the book's "title." It is always translated "revelation"—not "end of the world" or "final judgement."

While apocalyptic literature isn't limited to our own faith history, our antecedent cultures or that period of time (as my googling reinforced)—events of great destruction and disruption have occurred and still occur all over the world.

We'll focus on our own history for today. What is referred to as apocalyptic literature, using images of the violent destruction of the known boundaries of civil behavior, discourse and society developed in the post-exilic period of Jewish history and continued through early Christian history. There were many similar images to be found in earlier prophets including Isaiah, Zechariah, Ezekiel and Daniel, among others.

To grasp how the concept of a vision given by God, something which even now could not be known without God's unveiling it, and a vision of total destruction have been conflated into one concept in our thought world, it's important to understand at least two key facts about that era in Jewish history. It was believed that the end of foreign domination of Israel and the Israelites could only be brought about by divine intervention.

And because, then or now, it's unknown that nations will cede power, the accumulation of wealth, and whatever other perks are accrued by such domination, by going gently into the good night of freedom for the currently oppressed, it was also believed that even with God's divine intervention, cataclysmic events would be required to free the people of God.

Like all of us, I'd prefer to think such world-views were bound to their past and other cultures. I was therefore surprised and more than a little disturbed at a TV commercial seen last week. It invited us to imagine a time when the power was out, the roads were closed, you had no one to depend on and the grocery stores were empty—illustrated by a gleaming white pristine set of shelves and refrigerated cabinets with nothing in them—as though when such a time came, we would neatly remove things from the store; there would be no scraps, no upturned furniture, and we'd dust before we left. We do worse damage than that with an impending snowstorm.

Then, we were shown a scene of a nuclear family sitting on the wall-to-wall carpet of their home, lit by LED battery lanterns, gathering to share a meal that only needed, in this desperate time without public services, the addition of—wait for it—clean hot water. The apparent primary cook of the household told us she really liked this product because everything was pre-measured including the herbs and seasoning—as though we were being offered some kind of apocalyptic Blue Apron service. We might be tempted to laugh, but this was not a 3am infomercial being broadcast on some bootleg cable station in Montana. This was a commercial for the apocalypse during regular broadcast hours on a national network shown right here in the great state of New York.

Even though the apocalypse is an ancient image, such apocalyptic literature and imagery are still appealing to today's world as evidenced by its cultural updating, semi-regular pronouncements by those who

are interpreting signs of the end-times, and the great popularity of creative efforts like *The Walking Dead* or *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Hunger Games* wasn't the first movie in the genre (*A Clockwork Orange* might hold that title), but *The Hunger Games* certainly revitalized it. This popularity is undeniably fed by the anxiety of people experiencing themselves to be in a world out of their control, where old values and traditions fall away, where nothing can be relied on, where a pandemic has not yet receded, where the planet is under siege, where whatever power those in power have, it is not the power to change things.

Driven by anxiety, some of us turn to such literature, images or belief systems, others to survivalist tendencies, and still others to the accumulation of wealth and other tangible forms of security, focusing on the few within their blood or marriage circles. Perhaps, instead of laughing at and dismissing these catastrophic world views as response to fear, the fearful world that embraces them (and of which we are a part) deserves some kind of attention from the tradition which preserved and gave these images to much of the Western world.

Let's begin by not dismissing experiences of destruction, chaos, and the breakdown of safe public intercourse as a "little apocalypse" or signs of something worse to come. For people in Haiti slammed by successive waves of natural disaster and civil and social instability and violence, their world has already been turned upside down, never to be the same. For hundreds of thousands of refugees with their faces pressed against ancient or recently constructed barriers, their world has already been turned upside down, never to be the same. For thousands of people in the American West, driven from home by forest fires, flooding and draught, their world has already been turned upside down, never to be the same. We would never dare to suggest directly to any whose personal apocalypse has already come that this is not as bad as it can get—that there is worse to come—that this was just a warning for the rest of the world. So, let's not do it with our theology, our teaching, our response or our lack of response to such events and interpretations.

Secondly, we should be extraordinarily careful about providing our personal interpretations of what the purposes or power of God might be in contributing to those occurrences. It is a tempting way to make sense of the incomprehensible, but it is hubris to presume to know the mind of God. Even while claiming our faith heritage including these visions of great destruction, it is equally important to remember that God's imagination is not limited to human imagination. Just because humans seem to be limited to violence as the only means of bringing about great change, that doesn't mean God is.

So, what do we do? We reclaim a more authentic sense of our inherited texts than the interpretations with which they have been hijacked. We need to remember these visions and revelations were never intended merely to be a tale of the end times. They were always intended to be a tale of two times. Yes, an end time—and ending of injustice and lack of compassion, of oppression and the destruction of human dignity, but also a tale of a beginning time. A time of the in-breaking of God's purposes and presence in the world in a new and powerful way—a way that overcomes the death and destruction our human existence is prone to—to a world where God's rule of justice and compassion shapes all our living, breathing and being. These were always experienced to be visions of life and hope—of a promise that what is will not always be.

We begin by looking for the signs of two times in all these experiences. In moments of natural disaster and catastrophe, we see also those who, in the midst of the end of their world, rebuild not just homes, but places of worship. We see people who come together to build something new together. We see people who build green buildings and seek products safer for the environment, reclaim land, plant native species, and create wildlife preserves. We see people who go to unsafe places to feed and heal and build and garden and teach.

We hear a new beginning, when the laughter of children, the cries of the newborn and parents singing lullabies rises above the sound of gunfire and bombs—signs that spirits will not be defeated in the face of horror. We see it in the faces of those who have lost everything, who have no reason to hope for food, or compassion or justice in their homelands, but still have hope that it is somewhere in the world. We see it in their perseverance even in the absence of welcome. We see it in their daring to give birth on ships and beaches and behind fences. We see all those who respond in all these circumstances, not for personal gain but out of human compassion.

In every small moment of human history, where death and life share the stage, our task is to tell a tale of two times—a time where something is ending, often painfully, brutally, leaving spirits battered and grief-stricken; the same time where something is living and perhaps blooming, fed by the divine intervention of our God, who is above all, in all and through all and in every circumstance—a spirit, a presence and a person of hopeful activity. In every tale of two times, we are called to respond with compassion to the endings, all the while praying for, speaking of and working toward God's promise of the beginnings which are always possible with God.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Merciful God: We draw near to you in prayer, opening our spirits to yours, so that your vision and wisdom might inspire our hope and our work

In all the places where death reigns, grief weeps, fear abides, and hope's light flickers,

let us be the ministers of your compassion

let us be witness to your life-giving presence

let us be the tellers of hopeful stories

let us be workers for your justice

let us be the makers of your peace

The Lord's Prayer

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.

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.