

Sermon: The Coming Apocalypse**Scripture: Mark 13:1-8****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 18, 2018**

I thought the title of my sermon was kind of inappropriately intense for our lovely little Thanksgiving Sunday service with baptisms and families coming back together for the holidays, but what am I to do when we are given this particular scripture from the Gospel of Mark. Every year at this time on the last couple of Sundays before Advent, which, believe it or not, is where we are, the scriptures ramp up with end-of-world apocalyptic fervor. The church year runs from the first Sunday of Advent when we begin to prepare for the coming of Christ all the way through the year and back, always ending with an apocalyptic passage on this Sunday and then a passage from the passion narrative and Jesus' crucifixion next Sunday, which is always jarring also right around Thanksgiving. But that's the way things are laid out because originally Advent was not so much about preparing for Christmas as it was a season of preparing for the Second Coming of Christ.

Although we tend not to emphasize it in our particular Christian tradition, there is an element of apocalyptic, end-of-world cataclysmic threat in Christianity that has been there from the beginning, as evidenced in our scripture for this morning. Jesus himself seemed to occasionally suggest that the coming end of time was around the corner. Paul in some of his letters also writes as though the apocalypse could be tomorrow if not then before the end of his generation's lifetime. In case you're wondering, he was wrong. It never came.

I have a significant memory associated with this. It was a particular moment in my college years at William and Mary when I took a religion class called the Letters of Paul. The professor walked us through scripture explaining an evolution of thought within the scriptural text about what exactly Jesus' death and resurrection meant. He was showing us how Paul and later Gospel writers at first expected any moment a final consummation to take place now that Jesus was resurrected, but as time went on and people had to return to their day to day humdrum lives and generations began passing without a final consummation happening there began to develop in more detail an idea of a Second Coming of Christ. And I remember quite vividly sitting there in class and hearing that.

There I was the son of a minister who had grown up deep within the church, sung all the hymns and read all the scriptures, spent all my Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesday evenings at First Baptist Church and in that moment as I stared at my professor a realization broke over me that was both somewhat disturbing and somewhat liberating - and the thought was: "wait a minute, maybe this stuff is all made up!" I thought, "You mean the development of the idea of the Second Coming of Christ came from their being wrong about the first coming of Christ?! So they were like, 'well, ok, so things are still pretty much the same, so actually what's going to happen is that Jesus is going to come another time, a second time, yeah, yeah, that's it, Jesus will have a Second Coming and then finally all will be set to right, the righteous saved, the unrighteous destroyed, the kingdom finally established on earth as it is in heaven with Jesus as final victor!" What I

had always assumed was simply the truth of the matter as revealed by scripture sounded to me suddenly like a convenient fiction.

And so I walked out of that classroom and right on out of the church too deciding I wanted nothing more to do with it. I felt I had just glimpsed the little men behind the curtain and realized it was a lot of smoke and mirrors. This book that I had never had a second thought about the fact that it was God's book, written and handed down by God Himself, was written by a bunch of guys who were at best trying to make sense of things in the aftermath of Jesus' resurrection and at worst were politically maneuvering to secure their power by writing what they wrote. They were convinced and awaiting a series of events that never happened and so they had to come up with an ending to the story where they finally would get what they wanted. In this academic take on the Bible, it was simply written by very human humans, I was told, and I felt like scales had fallen from my eyes and the truth of the matter had been unveiled. My childhood religion was done.

It is interesting to me that this moment happened through the study of apocalyptic in Paul because that unveiling is exactly what the word "apocalyptic" means and intends to do to people. Apocalyptic literature in the scripture does 2 primary things – it unveils the truth behind the deception and corruption of the powers of this world and it reminds that ultimately God is in charge. Often this comes with the threat of the powers being destroyed in a final great, violent, bloody battle of good versus evil where good and God finally triumph, but basically the take home from apocalyptic is that we have fallen mesmerized in the sway of the powers of this world, but the truth of

God is breaking through and will finally be what wins the day. So when the disciple is overwhelmed and impressed by the massiveness of the temple structure in Jerusalem, Jesus says somewhat irritated at the disciples continually being enamored by the structures and values of this world, "Do you see that building? It'll all be thrown down, not one stone will stand... and this will be but the beginning of the birth-pangs of the new age." That is classic apocalyptic – you are enthralled by the wrong thing, convinced that salvation comes by way of Washington or Wall Street but true power comes from God. Wake up! Stay awake! Is often the plea from the Jesus and the prophets – you have fallen asleep, you are like the Walking Dead and God wants you awake and alive which means seeing the truth behind the deceptions of the powers of this world, of Rome or Washington or Media and Marketing, which all frame the world and path to salvation in very very different ways from the way our scripture and our faith frame it.

For me though the unveiling came regarding scripture itself as I walked out of that classroom and the church on that day, with this new appreciation for the human influence on what we call sacred scripture and a disturbing sense of how easily human fallen-ness can even distort the holiness of sacred word. This is why even though I came out of a more conservative approach to scripture and the Christian faith, I landed eventually in a progressive Christian seminary and church, because unlike conservative Christians, I could not believe from that point onward that scripture was the literal word of God. I did eventually come to believe that God's word and truth can be discerned out of this remarkable and powerful book, but am wary of how easily it

can be distorted by humans like ourselves who are far far too prone to self-deception for self-advancement's sake for me to believe any of us ever will finally get it right.

I believe it must be gotten right for us... which is a very apocalyptic thought.

It took about 6 years away from the church and Christianity for me to eventually wend my way back by God's hand to a monastery in the hills of western Connecticut. I'd like to say it was because of my dogged pursuit of God but really it was my dogged pursuit of a woman named Tracy who happened to relate to that monastery. But God knew how to hook me back in I guess and even as He ushered me out the door of that academic building in Williamsburg, God welcomed me back into the faith through the doors of that monastery. And it wasn't long before the counter-point moment in my life to that classroom moment was given on a road one late wintry night at the beginning of February when suddenly out of nowhere the veil was once again just for a moment pierced, and there came this profound sense of the truth of it all. I sat there in my car, stunned, and said - "oh my God, it's true, all the stories I had heard; the love of God, the resurrection of Jesus; my own life framed through that story so perfectly; a hand orchestrating it all, this in-between state we find ourselves, between where we began and where God is bringing us, it all dawned on me as beautifully exquisitely true.

I'm still trying to work out the implications of that experience and of course there are still questions and doubts because it would be wildly inappropriate for there not to be questions and doubts regarding

ultimate things, for the Divine Mystery intends to keep us working and wondering and struggling and reaching.

CS Lewis once said something like - to put it all in perspective, on the order of the history of the earth and even human history, 2000 years was really not that long ago, like 40 generations or so, and so the effect of Christ's resurrection is still young, still unfolding and being unpacked in our lives and in our world. We live between Christ's first coming and some final moment of consummation whatever that may look like. And in the meantime, through baptism and the reading of sacred scripture and spiritual practice and good works and communal growth we work to stay centered in and awake and attentive to God's truth that often lies hidden behind the noisy deceptions and beguilements of the powers of this world.

Oh, and Happy Thanksgiving!