

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 13: 9-13
SECOND LESSON: Mark 13:24-37
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FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“How to Understand Terrifying Texts”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

After reading all this I’m tempted to say, “Well Merry Christmas to you too!” What the heck! And I didn’t even read the *really* horrible parts. I have never been able to figure out why the creators of lectionaries think that preaching on judgment and the second coming is a great idea for advent. Don’t we want to hear about the incarnation? Don’t we want to hear about Jesus coming into the world? What we read today in both the Old and New Testaments is in a form called apocalyptic, and apocalyptic can be pretty terrifying. Revelation is apocalyptic. What most of us can’t figure out is why anyone would find this form of literature attractive in the first place.

Apocalyptic writings usually emerge during very hard times. Daniel was written around 165 BCE when Jerusalem was conquered and the temple profaned. The book of Revelation was written around 95 CE, another time of severe persecution. People who are in the middle of hell find hope in hearing that the times they are going through are expected and won’t last forever. The word apocalypse means unveiling or revelation. And the form these works take usually includes symbolic language, language that would not attract the attention of the authorities because no one had any idea what it meant except the insiders. Unfortunately, apocalyptic doesn’t come with a dictionary to decode everything. There are some standard elements. There is always a cosmic battle between good and evil. There are often dramatic visions and symbols, sometimes with numbers, colors and animals. The movement is linear, leading to a final climax. All of the present troubles are birth pangs that will lead to God’s reign finally being revealed. But exactly WHO the people or governments are that are being referred to is disguised. For the book of Revelation “Babylon” is almost certainly Rome.

The apocalypse in Mark’s gospel includes some parts that are standard and poetic. The sun will be darkened and the moon not give light, stars will fall from the sky and heavenly bodies will be shaken. This is part poetry part direct quotation from the Old Testament scriptures. We take it literally because we have that kind of mindset, but these words were not necessarily meant to be literal. Likewise, the gathering of the elect from the “four winds” and ends of the earth reflects an ancient understanding of geography and is just a way of saying “everyone.”

A great analogy that has been made about understanding and interpreting apocalyptic is trying to understand political cartoons from a

different era. Think about it for a moment. In a hundred years will anyone have any idea who George Santos is? Our cartoons are highly specific to time and place. If we look at something from the time of the Vietnam War we might still be able to figure it out. We wouldn't get all of it, but we know what Nixon looks like. A political cartoon from WW II would be a bit more challenging. We would probably guess that the eagle symbolizes the United States, and Hitler, is after all, Hitler. But going back further, who or what is the significance of a bear? That's Theodore Roosevelt, who legend has it refused to shoot a bear chained to a tree on a hunting trip. Teddy bears were named after him. By the Civil War we're lost and the Revolutionary War cartoons make no sense to us at all. In order to comprehend the meaning we have to do an in-depth study into the history and culture of the time.

But of course, when it comes to apocalyptic, no one wants to do this. No one wants to find out what meanings were attached to images for people back then. It's much more fun to make stuff up and scare the daylights out of people. According to Hal Lindsay writing in 1970 in "The Late, Great Planet Earth" the world was supposed to end on December 31, 1988. And the Left Behind series written by the LaHayes have traumatized generations of people worried that they have missed the Rapture. Theology can also have some very dangerous real-world consequences. The current volatile situation in the Middle East is at least partly the result of the well-intentioned meddling of Christian Zionists working to get a Jewish nation re-established in the early 20th century, not because they cared at all about the Jews, but because they wanted to lay the groundwork for Armageddon. Many Christian Zionists believe that the Temple needs to be physically rebuilt before Jesus can return, and people with these kinds of strong beliefs pour lots of money into making their ideas reality.

We're told to pay attention to the signs, but the signs have been with us always. If the world is in labor it has been in labor for a very long time. Every generation has been able to say with conviction, "The end is near!" What could be worse than the Black Plague that killed a quarter of the population of Europe? In the 20th century alone we have experienced the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the Kymer Rouge, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. Throughout time horrendous wars have been fought and disease raged. Natural disasters have taken place. AIDS, 9/11, the Pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the war in Israel/Palestine. Each and every generation provides enough savagery and tragedy for us to conclude that surely the end is near.

Commentators of an atheistic or cynical bent are also quick to say that Jesus believed the end was imminent and that he was flat out wrong. After all, Jesus did say, "Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." But it really depends upon what Jesus meant, because the first half of this apocalyptic message (that we didn't read) concerns the destruction of the Temple, widespread chaos and persecution. All of this did happen in the year 70. Jesus was no fool. He knew what would take place once the Zealots gained the upper hand and rebelled against Rome. But final judgment and a calling together of all the nations has not happened yet. That process began with Jesus' resurrection and it continues to this day and

beyond. Jesus also said, “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

As usual, what we need is balance. Apocalyptic writing concerns people, nations and political realities that existed at the time. They were about immediate or near events, not far distant ones. In essence, **it’s already happened**. Yet in another way because sin and suffering continue, the promise that God will directly intervene in our world is still valid. We have been promised that Jesus will return. The pain and suffering of this world will not last forever. Those who commit evil WILL have to answer for it. In the end things will be put right.

We’re told to watch and be on high alert. We’re also told to settle in for the long haul and endure. We live in a world of fear and hope, and that’s reality. God didn’t do this to us. We did this to ourselves. The human race causes most of its own suffering. The early followers of Jesus longed for his return because life was hard. And every time we pray the Lord’s prayer and say, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” we are asking for divine intervention in the world.

So what do we do with terrifying texts about the end of the world? First, we completely disregard the best sellers out there purporting to know the “truth” about what it all means. We ignore anyone who claims to know when the end of the world is. These people gain attention and make money off of fear. When times are good we can be grateful. When times are hard we can trust that it will not always be that way. But always the way to prepare for the coming of Jesus has nothing to do with panic and fear. It is about loving one another. We prepare by living how Jesus taught us to live, not in fear, but in faith. Amen.

Isaiah 13: 9-13

⁹ See, the day of the Lord is coming
—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—
to make the land desolate
and destroy the sinners within it.

¹⁰ The stars of heaven and their constellations
will not show their light.

The rising sun will be darkened
and the moon will not give its light.

¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil,
the wicked for their sins.

I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty
and will humble the pride of the ruthless.

¹² I will make people scarcer than pure gold,
more rare than the gold of Ophir.

¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble;
and the earth will shake from its place
at the wrath of the Lord Almighty,
in the day of his burning anger.

Mark 13:24-37

24 “But in those days, following that distress,

“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;

25 the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’

26 “At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. **27** And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

28 “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. **29** Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. **30** Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. **31** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

32 “But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. **33** Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. **34** It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

35 “Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. **36** If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. **37** What I say to you, I say to everyone: ‘Watch!’”