

Pentecost 24B Proper 28 Sermon 111509
1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

As we end the church year, our lectionary draws things to a close by having us look at the Gospel of Mark's use of what are known as "apocalyptic" images. We all know from the use of the term in modern culture, that apocalypse refers to the "end of the world." It seems that we go through cycles where we spend a good deal of time waiting, wondering and worrying about the end of time.

The first book in the Left Behind series was published in 1995. For a few years there, it seemed that everyone was talking about "The Rapture," the "tribulation," and what life would be like as the world prepared for the return of Jesus. Then we took a break for a few years. Now we have much written, and even a movie that is about to open in theaters that shows us what it will be like on December 21, 2012, when an unknown planet will crash into the earth – ostensibly as predicted by the Mayan calendar, created on Aug 11, 3114 *BC*. It seems that every once in a while, we get frightened by the present and have to try to see the future to hopefully prepare for some unseen disaster that is headed our way, so that we can be some of the "elect" who are spared as all others die horribly (or least suffer a lot).

Much of what we read on the subject of "the apocalypse," or the Second Coming of Christ, we get from the Book of Revelation – "revelation" being the actual definition

of “apocalypse.” But there are other apocalyptic writings in Scripture. The Books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Joel, Zachariah and Daniel in the Old Testament; Mark 13, 2 Thessalonians 2 in the New Testament; as well as several writings in the Apocrypha are all written in apocalyptic style. And it is crucial for us to understand apocalyptic literature in order to understand what Jesus is saying in this morning’s Gospel.

When things get bad; when things seem hopeless; when it seems that the present situation is beyond redemption, apocalyptic literature shows us that hope still exists. No matter what happens in life, there is always hope. That’s what apocalyptic writings are all about.

Jesus tells the disciples that the Temple will be destroyed. The Temple in Jerusalem took over 40 years to build. It stood over fifteen modern stories tall and the perimeter was 1,420 yards long. It was built of stones some of which weighed in excess of 100 tons each, to last forever; and Jesus said it would be destroyed. Not only that, the Temple was God’s home. In Jewish theology, it was the place where God actually dwelled. And Jesus said it would be destroyed. But look at what He said next. “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” In other words, out of absolute desolation and destruction; out of the most irredeemable of circumstances comes new birth – renewal – new life. That’s hope!

One of the mistakes we make as modern Christians, is to read apocalyptic literature as being word-for-word, literally accurate. That is what the Left Behind series – all 16

volumes of it – sought to do in the beginning. But then as time went on and there was more money to be made from scaring people, the authors embellished more and more until finally they had gone beyond simply misreading Scripture and were selling nothing more than science fiction with bad theology attached to it.

You see, the dualism that is set up by modern apocalyptic writers is not true at all. Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHay and the like would have you believe that the world is split in two. One part is ruled by Satan and the other part is ruled by God and the two are locked in a mighty cosmic struggle. In point of fact, Satan is not God's opposite. Satan is the opposite of Michael the Archangel. They were both, at one time, angels in the service of God who is the master of both. And God does not *need* to have Jesus return bodily to earth in order to redeem the world. Jesus accomplished that on the cross. As one writer puts it, "All appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, *God reigns*. Purposeful Evil is a creature, a parasite, a lamprey (eel) that lives off life, not the author of life itself¹." If we are to take *all* of Scripture seriously – not just the Book of Revelation – we must note that God made a covenant with Noah after the flood, that God would never again destroy the world in order to start over. But again, as King Oehmig puts it,

On the other hand, Scripture does maintain that history as we know it will end. There will come a day, the Lord's Day, when the architecture of this

¹ H. King Oehmig, Synthesis, Proper 20, November 15, 2009

present age will be supplanted by the rule of God. Nothing in this dimension is permanent.²

We are meant to have hope in the sovereignty of God. That's why we should consider the end of time. Not so that we will be frozen by fear. Not so that we will cease to care about what is happening in the world around us. But so that we can know that the post script that might be written on the end of the Book of Revelation could be, "the world and all that is in it belongs to the God of creation and love!"

When we look around today we see trouble. It is the way things are. Trouble appears, no matter how much we would like for it not to. Bad things happen. Economies crumble. Sick and poor people are ignored by those who could help them. Bad people act in the world, and in our lives. For reasons that may never fully be known, someone guns down those who are supposed to be in his care. Sometimes it seems that no matter which direction we look, someone is after us. It is at these times that the hope of God in Christ is so important.

In his collection of sermons entitled, Strength to Love, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. writes:

Our capacity to deal creatively with shattered dreams is ultimately determined by our faith in God. Genuine faith imbues us with the conviction that beyond time is a divine Spirit and beyond life is Life. However dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstances, we know we are not alone, for God dwells with us in life's most confining and oppressive cells.

² Id.

And even if we die there without having received the earthly promise, he shall lead us down that mysterious road called death and at last to that indescribable city he has prepared for us....

The Christian faith makes it possible for us nobly to accept that which cannot be changed, to meet disappointments and sorrow with an inner poise, and to absorb the most intense pain without abandoning our sense of hope....

Dr. King understood what it was that Jesus – indeed all apocalyptic writers – are really trying to tell us with these scary images of the end of it all. God is with us. And once we have fully experienced that reality and embraced the love of God in Christ as an *actual thing*, as a tangible thing, rather than something we read in the Bible and hear about on Sundays, there is no longer any need to be ruled by fear of the future. Whatever comes, no matter how frightening, we will handle it – with God’s help.

I’ll leave you this morning with something written by a pastor who was facing his own death in a very real and immediate way. Here is how he expressed the hope that we find in the loving God who gave His only Son to redeem us and whose very real Spirit dwells with us in this moment.

So here I stand, looking at the ground, smelling the faint fragrance of God. Never once did it occur to me that when I found God's trail again, it would ruin my life forever for once you feel the breath of God on your skin, you can never turn back, you can never settle for what was, you can only move on recklessly, with abandon, your heart filled with fear, your ears ringing with the constant whisper, “Fear not.”³

Amen.

³ Yaconelli, Mike, *The Door* (March-April 1998).