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November 14, 2021
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The Practice of Apocalypse

Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus (*ended his teaching and*) came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am the one!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and empire against empire; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Scholars generally note that William Butler Yeats wrote one of his most famous poems, "The Second Coming," in the aftermath of the First World War. This is true, he wrote the poem in 1919, but there was so much more happening in the world then. Notably, for Yeats, 1919 was the height of the Spanish Flu pandemic. During that horrible time, a third of the world's population was infected, and over 50 million people died. The Spanish Flu was particularly deadly among pregnant women, 70% of whom would succumb virus. Yeats' own wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, caught the virus while pregnant with their daughter Anne. Thankfully, Georgie survived, and it was during her recovery that Yeats wrote the poem with these haunting lines:

things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned

The poem ends with a vision of a lion-bodied monster with a human head roused from sleep, "vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle." And so, Yeats asks, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" The poem circles in my head, as we live in a time where things have fallen apart. Our children, missing trick-or-treating and Christmas pageants, and prom, have lost a piece of their innocence. We see a total breakdown in communication between political ideologies. Our planet is warming. The center does not hold. The question we hold is whether or not

this, too, will be a time of God's revelation—will God reveal herself to her people again or not?

Things have fallen apart before. In the year 70 of the common era, about forty years after Jesus's death, the Roman army laid siege to Jerusalem for five months before finally sacking the city and destroying the Temple. In today's reading, Jesus predicts this tragedy. Most scholars believe Mark pens this gospel during or immediately after the war which ended in the fall of Jerusalem. When we read these stories at the end of the gospel—remembering that it spans only 16 chapters—we can smell the burning buildings, we can hear the massive temple stones crash, we can feel the panic of losing the center of your world, we can feel the earth shake, we know the pain of five months of hunger, we know what it is to cry until we have dehydrated ourselves, to lose our minds in worry. When Mark writes this gospel, his audience knows—lived—these terrifying moments.

And so it really means something to have Jesus say, "Look, this is all going away. And terrible things will happen." It means something to hear Jesus say, "Keep alert. Pay attention." But all of this is also a reminder not to lose our heads. Change is coming, even tragedy. In some places it is already here. Don't lose your cool. Keep your eyes on the prize. This is not the end.

We call these texts apocalyptic literature. And, in our culture, apocalypse has come to mean something like the "great cataclysm at the end of days." But, really, apocalypse means "revelation." It means, the disclosure of great knowledge. Often, apocalyptic literature is chasing the rabbit down the hole: if you continue to behave in this way, this is what will happen. Visions of what happens if we do not curb the human impacts of global climate change are apocalyptic. Or if we do not actively work for an egalitarian society, an equitable society—those visions would be apocalyptic.

When we encounter apocalypses in the Bible, our aching question is, where is God in all of this? How is God revealed in this? How can this total destruction be a part of "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," as Mark introduces his gospel? How can all this—and now I mean climate change, and COVID-19, and five million deaths worldwide, and violence, and hate, and war, and on and on and on—how can God be in all of this mess? And the messes of our own lives which might seem trivial to some when they're held up against the problems of the world, but when I experience them in real time, in my life, sometimes they do feel like the great cataclysm at the end of days—the waiting for news, for a diagnosis, for a test result, for treatment, for a quarantine to end, for the funeral to be held—where is God in all of this? How is God revealed even here?

Our longing joins us to Mark's ancient audience. As they sifted through the rubble of Jerusalem, as they smelled the lingering stench of death and destruction, surely they asked, where is God in all this?

As Jesus predicts everything that happened, you can see them lean in, you can feel their longing for a God revealed to them from the midst of the rubble. In this gospel, Jesus spends his final breath in a loud cry of lamentation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In that moment, Mark leaves Golgotha and returns to the Temple mount, to the sanctuary, to the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place, the center of the center of life in Jerusalem, and, Jews believed, of life on earth, and there, the curtain was torn in two. To a broken people, Mark writes of everything that broke them. The center does not hold. What then, is God's great revelation? How does God reveal God's very self to us? A broken body? A broken curtain? A broken city? A broken people? As soon as the curtain rips, Mark swiftly returns our view to the cross. There, a soldier confesses, "Surely this man was God's son." That is the revelation of our God. God is in the brokenness, the rending, the rubble. God is in all of these things, because being in and with these things is how God redeems them.

Methodist pastor and artist Jan Richardson says when Jesus gets all doom and gloom like this, he is inviting us into a *practice* of apocalypse. She writes, "He calls us in each day and moment to do the things that will stir up our courage and keep us grounded in God, not only that we may perceive Christ when he comes, but also that we may recognize him even now."

Beloved, we long for the revelation—for the revealing of our God. Advent approaches. Advent, it turns out, is just another word for revelation, another word for apocalypse. Historically, Advent was a seven week affair, and these November texts were part of it. This week, I was informed by some in our community that, as far as they were concerned, life is Advent, save for Christmas and Easter and a few other reprieves in there. What truth! Life-altering cataclysms are happening every day, and we long to see our God in their midst. Our hearts ache, wondering where is God in all this mess, and the answer is, God is here, at the center, not as cause, but as companion, as cure.

Amen.