

Lauren Baske Davis
First UCC Northfield
11.29.20 Advent 1B
Sermon on Mark 13:24-37 - “Little Apocalypses”

Mark 13:24-37

*‘But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

‘From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.’

Sermon

Oof. I don’t need to tell you that the scripture that Marie just read, our opening to the Advent season, is not the kind of scripture that people draw in calligraphy and hang on their wall, not the kind that you needlepoint and put on a pillow in your home, not the kind of scripture you get on a Christmas card written in pretty cursive next to a flowing stream. No, our scripture today says:

*“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”*

This passage is called the “little apocalypse” in the Gospel of Mark. And while we know we won’t be needlepointing these words anytime soon, what do we do with this scripture?

Dear First UCCers, welcome to the season of Advent. If you are feeling a bit blue this year, the season of Advent is for you. In fact, though we don’t always read it, Advent traditionally begins this way each year, with apocalyptic literature. It sounds doomsday and scary. And it’s supposed to. But scriptures like this are not written to predict the end of the world, but rather to name and wake us up to what is eroding in our world. To *reveal* what is hidden and wrong within the walls of society.

Advent is a season of expectation, of waiting and staying awake with what seems like the end of the world. Why? Because there is something in us that knows that for anything new to take root, something old must die. To put it another way, when we are waiting for something or someone new to be born among us, something else has to move to make room for it.

Did you notice that the scripture reading began, “But in those days, after that suffering.” *After* that suffering. What suffering? Around when this passage was written, the Roman Empire

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was at war with the Jewish people, and demolished the Jewish temple. It was devastating. You can imagine that there was a lot of suffering. You see, the people who were writing Mark’s gospel over 2,000 years ago were asking the same questions we are. Can things go on? Should they go on the way they are? Because sometimes it feels like the stars are falling. Did you notice the two little words before “suffering?” Jesus said, “*After that* suffering...” After. The sheer fact that there could *be* an *after* is good news because it means it doesn’t go on forever.

Things have, and are, taking place that we can’t not notice. And the questions we are meant to ask during and after that suffering are: What is being revealed? What are we waking up to?

You see, apocalyptic literature, scary as it seems, was meant to be illuminating. Do you know what the word apocalypse in Greek means? Apocalypse in Greek means revelation. Apocalypse—revelation. Apocalyptic literature reveals the problems of the day, but then it is meant to give hope and help to those struggling with the state of their lives and the state of the world.

In ancient writing, it’s meant as a word of “comfort, that no matter how difficult things became, God would not abandon them [even to the ends of the earth] and that God would ultimately prevail.”¹ It was meant to convey that God was with the people, and most certainly bringing an end to things, but not the things you think. The things that God is stamping out—the things that are ending—our scripture promises, are the injustices of the world, the chronic illness and suffering, the addiction, homelessness and hunger. It’s those things that God is bringing to an end in order to bring something better and new. That’s what apocalyptic writing wants to express.

These past several years have been a revealing time in our country – that’s for sure. Too many times this year, we’ve said ominously, “Oh great, what could possibly be next?” or “Well, that seems on par with 2020.” It has felt this year, and the past few, that we’ve had lots of little apocalypses, too. Family separations in immigration policy, sobering environmental reports, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, so many others; violence and murder at the hands of authorities. The pandemic which has laid bare the holes in our social safety nets when it comes to health care, economic stability, housing and food insecurities. Now we’re seeing the health care system taxed beyond reckoning with the pandemic. It’s like everything has been tested and stretched past its limits. We’ve seen the mess.

But we are also *seeing the mess*. It’s been laid bare. We are seeing parts of our society that we haven’t revealed to us before—things that have been unwell or downright oppressive for a long time. This is what it is to stay awake, as our scripture asks us to do.

I’m not telling you in the midst of an exhausting pandemic not to rest. Keeping awake is more of a spiritual, ethical posture of what it is to live as people of faith. It is, to borrow the words of scholar, Dr. Marcia Riggs, “being aware of, enraged by, and willing to protest in solidarity with people who are pushed to the margins of society because of ...[the] objectification and dehumanization we enact upon one another.” To live into Advent is to bring

¹ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/11/pentecost-26-c-joy-in-november/>

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your whole self and see things for what they are, and to have a posture of attentiveness to what is being revealed. That is our work in Advent. Or to be pithy, it is only in the dark that we can see the stars.

Now, in order to keep awake, to keep an attentive posture, we must also almost paradoxically, be people who dream. To see the mess of the world, to see the ugly truths, and to let ourselves be changed by them, to let the revelations wash over us—and then to be people who dream with God—to imagine the world in the ways that it doesn’t yet exist. That’s why our Advent theme this year is “those who dream.”

We are called to be those who dream. If 2020 has been a year—and it has—and you’re ready to leave it behind, good! The start of Advent—today—is the start of the new church year. Happy New Year! We are going to be people who dream and make room for something new. In Advent we get the gift of that new start.² We start with what is being revealed. And then we dream with God, because people who dream can change everything.

Pope Francis has an op ed in the New York Times this week about the pandemic, entitled, “A Crisis Reveals What Is in Our Hearts.” He said:

“where the danger is, also grows the saving power.’...Where humankind has to act is precisely there, in the threat itself; that’s where the door opens. This is a moment to dream big. To rethink our priorities—what we value, what we want, what we seek—to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of. God asks us to dare to create something new. We cannot return to the false securities of the political and economic systems we had before the crisis. We need economies that give to all access to the fruits of creation, to the basic needs of life: to land, lodging and labor. We need a politics that can integrate and dialogue with the poor, the excluded and the vulnerable, that gives people a say in the decisions that affect their lives. We need to slow down, take stock and design better ways of living together on this earth.”³

My friends, God’s goodness is present among us. God’s love for the world will never go away. Our Advent scripture reminds us that even the worst that can happen, or the worst evil in the world cannot outlive or snuff out God’s love for the world. We are called now to dream with God, who is bringing an end; an end to all that takes away abundant life and hope. We dream with a God to who can turn the world on its head, who promises to be born among us, who promises a world where the haughty are toppled and the lowly lifted up. Where a vulnerable child will be born in a barn and named a king. We dream with that God, who is always bringing something new and beautiful into the world. Amen.

² Alan Storey, Methodist Minister in South Africa, paraphrase.

³ Pope Francis, *NYT Op/Ed* 11.26.20, essay adapted from his new book, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/26/opinion/pope-francis-covid.html?auth=login-email&login=email>