

Apocalyptic Advent

It hardly seems to be a text for New Years, does it? "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

But today is New Year's Day, liturgically speaking. The first day of the new liturgical year, the first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of a new cycle of stories that leads us off with a literal and figurative bang; a liturgical Black Friday that surely might bring out the worst in us as we scramble, not for door-busting sales, but to save ourselves from impending doom.

I feel like we are at the center of a liturgical and cultural mash-up here, like we are watching a movie with the wrong soundtrack, it feels disconnected and disjointed, out of season and out of time.

Still recovering from our tryptophan hangovers, we are jolted awake by scenes of mystery and violence as this apocalypse and every other apocalypse, gets jumbled together and we are assaulted by visions of the end.

But this is the first Sunday of Advent. Where are the scenes of quiet and calm, gentle anticipation of a baby being born, calm meditations on light being born in the darkness?

And don't we have enough apocalypse already. Every other book, every other movie, it seems, has apocalyptic themes as we struggle in our collective cultural psyche to make sense of a world that, increasingly, feels strange to us and out of control.

And in the last few weeks we have been overwhelmed by news of violence and racism and terrorism. Every day a new fear arising, every day another obstacle between us, and any lasting peace of mind.

The killing of Jamar Clark in Minneapolis a couple of weeks ago, showed us, once again, that the veneer of civility in this town is exceedingly thin and that the deep divides of racism lie just under the surface, waiting to be exposed. And now in the national litany of cities gone bad, Minneapolis becomes just another entry in the list alongside Chicago, New York, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Ferguson.

The attacks in Paris made major headlines yet they count as one attack of almost 40 terrorist attacks in November all around the globe claiming over 350 lives. And the sad and startling truth is that the month of October was worse, both in number of

attacks and lives lost. What is shocking is not how bad November and the attacks in Paris were, what is shocking is that November was a pretty average month in what has become a steady barrage of attacks and killings.

And tomorrow the Paris Climate Change talks begin and what we know is that the promises already made by the countries participating will help keep the global temperature from rising as fast as it might if we did nothing. But it will still rise, not 8 degrees by 2100, but 6, still too much, still with devastating effects.

We are surrounded by stories of apocalypse.

And this is just a short list. We could add the backlash against refugees occurring in the United States; the increasingly volatile rhetoric against immigrants fueled by the political campaign season; the saber-rattling between Turkey and Russia. The list goes on.

And then there are the more personal ones: the ones that do not make headlines but threaten the stability of our own personal lives. A terminal diagnosis out of the blue that, in a few minutes time, changes your life from "I have all the time in the world," to "I have a few months, maybe a year." Or the relationship that had so much promise suddenly going bad. Or the job that that seemed to be all you ever wanted becoming insufferable. Or your child who seems hell-bent on making every mistake possible before they turn 18. Financial hardship, the struggles with addiction; coping with depression and the loss of personal meaning or the loss of a dear friend, or sibling, or partner or child.

We hardly need the news to feel like the end is near. Sometimes we need only look in the mirror.

We are immersed in loss, bathed in fear. We are awash in anxiety. Enough already. We come to church for comfort, for hope, for some sense that it will be OK, we come looking for the gentle dawn of Advent, awash, not in anxiety, but suffused with that pre-dawn hope that all will be born anew, if only we wait with patience and expectation. And then we get a text like this? Can't we catch a break?

The Bible is a lot of things, but one thing it is not, is a pair of rose-colored glasses, it does not candy-coat reality, it does not promise a proverbial rose-garden.

In fact, the garden that it did promise, the Garden of Eden, well the only real promise there is that we will have to leave it, leave it for a life that is, by nature, hard and uncertain and full of longing for what could be but, it appears, will never be.

Where is hope? Where is the motivation to go on? Where is the presence of God amidst all this violence and destruction and loss?

Yet even as the Bible offers an unblinking view of a very gritty world, it does something else, it doesn't offer hope IN SPITE of the harsh realities we face, it offers hope BECAUSE OF the harsh realities we face, not that we might escape them, but that we might become who we are meant to be in the midst of them. Because it is in the midst of these challenges, this suffering, this doubt and fear that we find God, and in finding God, we uncover our true selves.

For apocalypse does not actually mean the end of the world. It certainly does in popular usage and the Bible also uses that imagery to great effect. But the cataclysmic imagery is not the point, the point of an apocalypse is the revealing of God, the unveiling of God, the discovery of God in an unexpected place, the presence of God where God seems most absent, the hope of God where all seems hopeless. Apocalypse means revelation, it is a beginning, not an end; it is a point of departure, not a destination.

In the apocalyptic passage from 2 weeks ago in Mark, after the litany of end-of-world imagery, Jesus concludes, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." It is the beginning of birth pangs, not the beginning of the death rattle. And in today's passage Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near." Stand up! Raise your heads! Your forgiveness is near, your freedom, your birth, is near. This is a beginning, not an end.

Even in the midst of the violence and chaos, the racism and terrorism, the impending change of a degraded eco-system, there are indications of new birth, subtle shoots of new life coming forth, slender signs of new beginnings.

As any armchair psychologist will tell you, the first thing we need to do is recognize we have a problem. And with the killing of Jamar Clark we have the opportunity to confront our deeply entrenched racism and continue to fight to create a culture which achieves its aspirations and doesn't just dream of them. Make no mistake, if all we do in response to his death is scapegoat the police, then we have failed to take to heart the real issues that Jamar's death, and every other death that is the result of systemic oppression, unveil. We, sitting here today, and the culture that we benefit from, our relative privilege and wealth, these are the real killers. Where we shop, go to school, live, bank, eat in restaurants, all of these daily decisions that don't even seem like decisions, all of these build into a mountain of protection that keeps us and people who are different, in class, color and consciousness, separate and not at all equal.

And the truly insidious nature of the problem is that we aren't even conscious of creating the separation. It just seems to be there. And, I don't believe, do any of us mean to do it. But we are complicit in and benefit from, a system that is designed to be more easily accessible to people who are seen as normative, and far more inaccessible to everyone else. This is not a problem with the police. This is a problem with who we are as human beings and the culture we have created.

But it is NOT the end of the world. It is, in fact, the birth of a new one. For if we take seriously what lies before us we have the opportunity to live into the dream of our country, we have an opportunity to make real all our greatest aspirations.

And while I don't believe St. John's will change the world by itself, we can do our part. As it happens, we are poised to take on a new partnership, possibly on the North Side, to increase our commitment to racial justice and overcome the deep divide that we face. And this partnership will be focused on the hard work of building relationships across lines of race, class and culture to find what we intuitively know but so rarely experience, that we are all brothers and sisters under our skin.

We also have the opportunity to say a resounding "No!" to the misplaced fear of Syrian Refugees that is sweeping our country. By succumbing to that fear we only play into the stereotype that they have of us, that we are cold-hearted people, not willing to risk welcoming the stranger. But it is a betrayal of our own heritage and teachings to reject them. Not just our Judeo-Christian heritage, but our American one as well. But on January 3rd, St. John's will co-host a concert at Our Lady of Grace Church in Edina that will benefit the work of the American Refugee Committee with Syrian Refugees. We can sell close to 900 tickets. Lets fill up the place up.

Let us send a message that Minnesota will open its arms to all refugees and let the world know that we will always, we will always, err on the side of compassion and welcome and not give in to misplaced fear.

We also may have the opportunity, as a part of an upcoming Capital Campaign, to install solar panels on the south-facing sanctuary roof, which could generate upwards of 50% of our electrical needs. The only way to slow down climate change is through radical reductions in our carbon footprint. The installation of panels, combined with increased efficiency in our heating systems and increased reduction in our energy usage would go a long way toward achieving this goal. We CAN make a difference.

And all the personal apocalypses as well, they also hold the seeds of new life within them. But, I want to be very clear here, when we are going through gut-wrenching, life-changing events, we often do not see those seeds, we often only see loss and pain and destruction. And the often-lost irony is that it is only BECAUSE we only see pain and loss, that the possibility of new life emerges. For it is not that it SEEMS to be darkest before the dawn, it IS darkest before the dawn and we can't skip that part of the journey.

Remember the ad on TV a while back that said a healthy human eye could see the light of a single candle at night at a distance of 10 miles? It needs to be perfectly dark and we need to give ourselves time to adjust to the darkness. But we can see that candle flicker. Maybe that is what Advent is, maybe that is why Advent begins

with the end. We have four weeks to get used to the dark, four weeks to confront the chaos that surrounds us, four weeks to prepare ourselves for the work that lies ahead.

And if we do all that, if we squint through the haze of the apocalypse, then maybe, just maybe, off in the inky distance you will see a candle light flickering, a single flame in the dark, that, if we prepare for it, just might be the light of change that this world so desperately needs.

Amen

Bill Peterson
Minister for Children, Youth and Service
11/29/15
Luke 21:25-36

November 29th, 2015 was the 57th anniversary of the ordination of my father-in-law, Bill Crews to the priesthood. To commemorate the event he was invited to give the Benediction. Having no idea what my sermon was about, he had prepared this Franciscan benediction:

“May God bless you with DISCOMFORT...
at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships;
that you may live deep into your heart.

May God bless you with holy ANGER...
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people;
that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with TEARS...
To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection,
starvation and war;
that you may reach out your hand to comfort them, turning their pain to joy.

May God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS...
to believe that you can make a difference in this world,
doing what others claim cannot be done.”

Amen