

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the One who is the true Messiah and never leads us astray, Jesus Christ Our Savior and Lord, amen.

We've come almost to the end of another Church Year. Since next week is the Sunday when the Church acknowledges and celebrates Christ the King, this is the final week in the year of Mark. As we do each year in the Church we end the year with what we call apocalyptic writings. The First reading from the book of Daniel is apocalyptic and the entire 13th chapter of Mark is often referred to as the 'little apocalypse.' These are complex texts, deeply rooted in Old Testament language, history, and theology. Yet, despite the difficulties they present to us modern day folk, they're also powerful texts teaching us not to follow false messiahs and prophets. The dangers of overzealous nationalism and reactionary violence are clear in this passage. Violence begets violence. The violence referred to in our passage today is the Jewish revolt against the Romans in the year 66. That revolt lasted until 70 AD. The Romans laid siege to the city and utterly destroyed everything, including the greatest structure ever built up until that time, the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus points his followers in another direction. We are to trust in God's loving care even if the world around us seems to be falling apart before our very eyes.

In the Gospel today, Jesus talks about wars and rumors of wars. He talks about earthquakes and famine. If you read a bit more from this chapter, Marks also

tells us the heavens themselves will be shaken, the stars refuse to shine and the moon will turn to blood. Even for the disciples of Jesus' day, to hear Jesus say not one of those very large stones of the Temple in Jerusalem will be left standing must have been very frightening images. We tend to think of apocalyptic writing as seeing into the future to the end of the world. Sometimes the language that the ancient people used does seem that way, but that isn't what apocalyptic writing is primarily about. The word apocalypse simply means revelation. Apocalyptic writing was very popular from the 2nd century BC until about the 2nd century AD. So, for 400 years apocalyptic writing was the way people wrote. If I had to compare it to something today, I would say it was something like our modern-day comic books or graphic novels.

The images painted with these words don't portray the end of the world, but rather major social, cultural, and political changes that might seem like the end of the world... So, apocalyptic writings describe the end of an era, which almost always comes with strife, persecution, suffering and pain, but also begins a new era where those who are remaining are vindicated. That is exactly what happened in the history of the early Christians. Mark's Gospel was written sometime around 80 AD. So even though Jesus spoke these words some 50 years earlier, by the time Mark recorded them the Temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 as a result of the Jewish revolt that began in the year 66 AD.

Jesus' words of warning in the entire 13th Chapter of Mark tell his followers not to listen to or follow other false leaders who will come along and lead the people astray. Jesus wants his disciples to follow him in the way he has taught them and in the way he has shown them and will show them as he makes his way to the cross, refusing to take the bait and fight back. Jesus' way and the way of those who would be his disciples was and always is the way of non-violence. So, when the Jewish zealots urge revolt against the Romans, Jesus' followers did what He instructed and fled the city to the mountains of Judea. The Jewish nation was nearly wiped out, but Christians, who didn't participate in the revolt were not seen as the same kind of threat by the Romans. If they had been, trust me the Romans would have tracked them down and wiped them out just like they did to the Jews who fled to the mountain top of Masada. The Romans surrounded that entire mountain and constructed a siege wall almost 400 feet high and then a battering ram to breach the fortifications of the mountaintop fortress. In total the Romans dedicated over 15,000 troops and several months pursuing these last 960 survivors of the Jerusalem revolt. By the time the Romans breached the Masada defenses the Jewish people on the mountain top had all committed suicide. If the Romans dedicated that much of their resources to track down and destroy the last remaining group of survivors from the Jerusalem revolt, you can bet they would have done exactly the same thing to the Christians if they had participated in that war.

So, armed with that bit of history, hopefully we can dispel with the notion that apocalyptic writings are always about the end of the world. However, having said all that, we can still derive relevant meaning that applies to our own lives from apocalyptic literature. For the early Christians the message was to stay connected to the teachings of Jesus and stay connected to the Church despite what happens all around. Skipping ahead to the time of Martin Luther. These same scriptures held out hope during a time when the great plague was spreading across Germany and all of Europe. At its height the plague took 1 out of every 3 people. One third of the entire population. Luther sometimes did 2 or 3 funerals a day. Surely the black plague must have seemed like the end of the world for those people at that time. Clinging to the word of God and to the Church of God was the only hope the survivors had when everything else was lost. Knowing those who stayed firm in their faith would be vindicated; knowing those who stayed firm would see Christ and be welcomed into his arms for all eternity had to be the only hope in what must have seemed like a totally hopeless world.

Again, skipping ahead to our day, we face wars against a largely faceless enemy in this so-called war on terror. We find scapegoats in all Muslims or all people of Arab descent, or even in all people who look different than we do. The earthquakes come so regularly we hardly even notice them anymore, unless you live in California or near a fault line. In California, the devastation of wildfires

that take out whole towns seems like the end of the world as we know it. Even our beloved Democratic Republic seems threatened by radicalists on both sides of the isle. Legal ballots that either weren't counted or illicit ballots that should be counted seem to be deciding close races and predictions are that it's going to get worse before it gets any better can make us think, politically, it's the end of the world as we know it. Even hitting closer to home right here in our own congregational family, I think about all the funerals we done since I've been here. Death still touches every family and the sting of death hasn't abated just because we live in a more modern or 'post-modern' time.

To all these omens that we think point to the end of the world, Jesus still says, slow down and take a deep breath. There will always be wars and rumors of wars. There will always be earthquakes and forest fires. There will always be death. There will always be pain and suffering and persecution. Well, maybe not forever... Jesus did make one huge big-league promise to come back again and to gather up all the faithful so that where He is, we can be too. In another book of apocalyptic writing we know as the Book of Revelation, Jesus reveals there will be a day when there won't be any need to even cry any more because God will take away death forever. In the true spirit of apocalyptic literature we look to that day. We hope for the time when those of us who have remained faithful to Jesus Christ

we also be vindicated. When we will see these things we fear were really not the boogie man, but only tests of our perseverance and faith.

May God give us the wisdom to see past all the false leaders and prophets and give us eyes for Jesus only. May we follow Jesus, carrying our cross straight through the suffering and pain to the glory of the Kingdom of God. May we see with eyes of faith, even in our darkest hours, when it seems like the end of the world as we know it. Because the love of Jesus Christ never ends and no matter how bad this world gets it's never the end, but through Christ we emerge and we find ourselves recreated and resurrected as new creatures in Christ. Thanks be to God for the gift of His Only Son, amen.