

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
November 18, 2018

Mark 13:1

As Jesus 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.”

The Thomas Fire stood as the largest fire in California’s history, only to be eclipsed in August by the Mendocino Complex Fire. Then came the devastation of recent days in Paradise in Northern California and so far over 70 people have died with more than 1,000 listed as missing. It has been a century since a fire in the United States caused deaths on the scale of the Camp Fire. That was the Cloquet Fire in 1918, in Minnesota. It killed nearly 500 people. It seems beyond comprehension—the magnitude of this destruction and death. The skies are black with smoke.

The news has gone *apocalyptic*. *Apocalyptic*— meaning, “foreboding imminent disaster or final doom. Signs of the coming end-times.” In today’s Gospel, Jesus *goes apocalyptic*.

“Rabbi, what stones! What a magnificent, eternal-looking church!”
exclaim the disciples as they looked around like children all a ga-ga at the
Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus replies,

“Not a stone will be left on stone.
This great building will be destroyed, wars and rumors of wars,
nation against nation, earthquakes, famines.”

Jesus *goes apocalyptic* in the Gospel of Mark. He speaks to the twelve, his own selected inner-circle, letting them in on a somber, apocalyptic secret—

“This temple, grand as it appears, eternal as it seems, shall end, shall be
crushed like sand.”

This is like saying that the earth is about to spin off its axis!

Jesus warns them about a cataclysmic ending. Contrary to what you may have been led to believe, when Jesus *goes apocalyptic* and talks of the end, he's not predicting the future; he is speaking of the precariousness of the present. They were an occupied people, living under the harsh, destroying Empire of Rome.

“This temple, this world of ours, is not as stable and not eternal as it appears or we wish it to be.”

Most of us—educated, respectable, privileged, liberal Christians get nervous when Jesus *goes apocalyptic*. We prefer Jesus as a great moral teacher, an example of compassion for the poor, a champion of justice and peace, someone who gives us a spiritual boost. The disciples say,

“Jesus, you have told us that you are leaving, so before you go, give us some final words of wisdom. We would like some reassuring words of comfort and guidance.”

And Jesus *goes apocalyptic* on them. He says to his disciples:

“All of this is ending, stone ripped from stone, all will be reduced to rubble.”

Melville calls this sort of “take” and expectation the “November of the soul.” Remember Willie Loman in “Death of a Salesman?” His “take” and expectation go like this: “I’m feeling kind of temporary.” Gerard Manly Hopkins wrote a poem called *Spring and Fall* which describes this dour anticipation. It’s a poem about a little girl playing in the leaves and feeling a sadness, a grief about the dying world around her:

Margaret, are you grieving
Over goldenrod unleaving.
Leaves like the things of man, you

With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! As the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Through worlds of wan wood leaf meal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrows springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

As the leaves fall around the child, as they die and fall around us, we become aware of the inevitability of death, not just for the outside world, but for ourselves. It is Margaret, it is ourselves, that we mourn for.

Going apocalyptic is a question about vulnerability and loss. It's a question about our anxiety and fear. It's a question about the uncertainty of our future and the unpredictable nature of life. It's real, while at the same time we may be enjoying our comfortable moments. It's a question of loss and sorrow. These are not just about the circumstances around us. Not even just about the big cataclysmic events. It's about the spiritual conditions that live within us—the births and deaths we experience throughout our lives, chapter by chapter. Some chapters are better when they are over.

I recently read a article about a new app for our smartphones. The app is called *WeCroak*. (Pretty harsh sounding! I'm hesitant to say it out loud!) Five times a day *WeCroak* sends an alert to its users. The alerts, the messages, arrive at random moments and always give some sort of reminder about the inevitability of death with some challenging words or a bit of wisdom. The site is actually based on a Bhutanese aphorism—

“To find happiness, contemplate death five times a day.”

Here’s what the reviewer of the app had to say: (*The Christian Century*, Nov 7, 2018)

WeCroak inflicts a cumulative wallop. It lets you contemplate mortality in the abstract, but it doesn’t let you stop at the conceptual. It forces you to consider death personally, wrecking whatever defenses you’ve erected to protect yourself. “The bizarre thing is, it made me happy as it messed with me,” just as it said it would.

Remember the Bhutanese aphorism—

“To find happiness, contemplate death five times a day.”

The reviewer wrote:

For instance, my teenage son refused to do the dishes. I asked, he ignored. I insisted, he refused. I tend to explode when something like this happens. This time, before I opened my mouth to yell at him, my phone buzzed. “Don’t forget you’re going to die.” I inhaled deeply. I stood silently, as if I had just discovered something. I had just discovered something. I don’t want my rage lodged in my child’s psyche. I spoke softly to my son. It made me happy.

WeCroak goes apocalyptic. And then, in fact, we learn something. It’s a crazy-way to teach wisdom. But it works. I bought the app for 99 cents.

When Jesus *goes apocalyptic* he’s describing, really preparing, his disciples, and preparing us, for a time, an inevitable time, when we will experience our whole world changing—when things will no longer be as they used to be, when there is a cosmic shift in our lives. Jesus confronts us in order to prepare us, get us ready, so that we might build the kind of solid foundation in God—a foundation not made of stones or any other thing that we might create ourselves. He confronts us in order to prepare us for a time when what used to illumine our lives no longer does, when

the stars by which we once navigated no longer point the way, and when the powers on which we depended are no longer dependable.

No doubt the disciples were very impressed with those giant stones that made up the Temple in Jerusalem. They were country boys and had never seen such grandeur. Of course they had seen grandeur, every night in their own backyard when they looked at the night sky and the stars or looked out over the valleys covered in wild flowers— and much more. God’s creation itself is full of grandeur, but they were in the big city now! And they were impressed with all that is manmade.

So Jesus *goes apocalyptic*. He makes us look somewhere other than ourselves for our stability, somewhere other than ourselves for the source of our security. He prepares them and us for the aftermath of his death and what would look like the defeat of their mission. He prepares them and us to look for God, not in the things that are passing away but in the foundations of faith and the embodiment of God’s love in the community of the faithful. A lasting permanence in what seems so fragile. He prepares them to be alert to the presence of God in unexpected places and surprising ways—in the beauty of life, the mystery of love, the wonder of creation, in the goodness and beauty and capacity to love that resides in each of us, each of us who are made in the image and likeness of God.

Sometimes, what we call death is, in the hands of God, the pangs of birth. Only a living God can make of an end, a new beginning. When Jesus *goes apocalyptic* he’s drawing them and us closer to God.

BUZZ It’s my app: The words and the wisdom are from Paul, St. Paul—

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

AMEN