

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.  
We would be silent now Lord, and expectant, that we may receive the gifts  
we need so that we may become the gifts others need. Amen. (Guerrillas of Grace)

The gospel reading for this morning comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark and is known as the Little Apocalypse. It contains many of the images that are found in other apocalyptic parts of the Bible – the books of Daniel, Ezra, and Enoch. Apocalyptic literature deals with the end times and the picture is never pretty. The universal destruction implied by falling stars and a darkening universe sounds as scary as anything we can imagine – rendering rampaging terrorists or the Corona virus as merely ho-hum events.. This passage says that although no one knows the exact day and hour of the end, it will come to pass soon, so since it's now 2000 years later and the sun is still shining, soon must be a relative concept.

Mark is the earliest of the gospels, most likely written between 66 and 70 AD. And this passage in particular is dated to a specific year, 69. The background for this text is the Jewish-Roman war. It began in 66 AD, with a revolt by the Jews against the Romans. In November of that year, a Roman general and his troops launched an attack on Jerusalem to put down the rebellion. He expected just to roll over the disorganized and probably badly-equipped Jewish fighters. But after he entered the city from the north, he was turned back as he approached the Temple Mount. Stunned by his defeat, he retreated in disarray and sustained substantial losses as he fled to the coast. Vespasian, probably the greatest general of that time and soon to become emperor, then took matters into his hands and with 6000 heavily armed troops began a march down through Galilee toward Jerusalem. Despite heroic resistance by the Jews, he reached Jerusalem in June of 68. Incredibly, once again the Jews were saved from almost certain defeat by internal power struggles in Rome. The emperor Nero had died and 4 different candidates were trying to succeed him. Vespasian was called back to Rome and the Jews were given an 18 month reprieve. In spite of the relief, they knew that it was only a matter of time. In fact, Vespasian won the power struggle back in Rome and sent another general off to finish the job in Palestine. In April of 70, Roman soldiers returned

and sacked the city and destroyed the temple.  
But in that grace period of 69, with the Roman armies and their leaders away,  
rebel supporters were traveling throughout Palestine,  
calling the faithful to a final battle.  
They would have portrayed the war as a sure sign of the messianic age.  
All true Jews should come to the defense of Jerusalem.

As a side note here, although this all sounds impossibly long ago,  
when I was in Israel, we visited the site of Masada,  
the forbidding rock plateau in the middle of the desert,  
where a group of Jews retreated from Jerusalem in 66.  
Standing on the top, looking down into the desert,  
you can still see the lines on the ground that marked the camp  
of the 10<sup>th</sup> Roman legion that laid siege to that group.  
It looked as if the army had camped there just last month  
and not almost 2000 years ago.

In the year 69, the Jewish people,  
in the middle of a war that they knew they couldn't win,  
facing not just the takeover of their land  
but more importantly, the possible destruction of the temple,  
the temple which was to have lasted forever.  
It was, in a sense, an apocalyptic moment for them.  
Their world was being destroyed.  
Their culture, their religion annihilated.  
What felt like the end to them was, as the author of Mark saw it,  
a very necessary movement in history.  
Rome had to be overthrown and the temple order had to be destroyed  
for the liberation of the world.  
Jesus' coming called the people to dismantle the old order of temple cult  
and corrupt power.  
The disciples were anxious to know what the signs would be.  
How would they know when the end is near?  
Mark's response to them is, you're looking for the wrong signs.  
It is the cross that stands at the center of history  
and is the focus of all true political discernment.  
It is Jesus who is the transforming moment in history.  
And then in a prefiguring of the passion story,  
he tells them a short story about a man going on a journey.  
You need to stay awake for you don't know when he will return –

in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or at dawn.  
Some brilliant commentator figured out that these times are an echo  
of the events of Jesus' last night –  
the Last Supper in the evening, the general idea of Peter's denial at midnight,  
the specific time of his betrayal at cockcrow  
and dawn when Jesus was handed over to the Roman authorities.  
And of course, there is that final warning not to fall asleep,  
which is exactly what the disciples did on that last night  
in the garden of Gethsemane.  
“The discipleship community is exhorted to embrace the world as Gethsemane:  
to stay awake in the darkness of history, to refuse to compromise  
the politics of the cross.” (*Binding the Strong Man*, p. 348).

In fact Mark's message is a kind of counter recruitment  
to the disciples and the Jews.  
He's saying don't join the zealots in their fight against Rome.  
This war with Rome is a side issue and not only that,  
the temple should be destroyed  
and suffering and tribulation will come if a new order is to be born.  
Jesus' coming is the birth of a new age,  
an ending to the structures of power and entitlement of the old age.  
The disciples are to be ready, not for the coming of the Romans  
or the resurgence of a Jerusalem/Temple reign,  
but for the final advent of the Human One.

What does it mean to have our worlds end?  
We've never experienced the cataclysm that Jesus talks about  
but many of us have lived through endings in our own worlds  
that even if we were prepared for them, were very hard.  
Maybe the Corona virus is as close as we've ever come to a kind of global disaster.  
We weren't able to be together physically and that was a huge loss  
that we are still beginning to understand the depths of.  
But we've also lost jobs. We've lost the good health we used to take for granted.  
We've lived through the deaths of parents, brothers and sisters,  
our spouses, and probably hardest of all, our children.  
And when those things happen, it does seem as if our world has ended.  
We've been through our own little apocalypses –  
maybe little in the sense they don't involve the whole universe  
but none the less earthshattering for us personally.

The first Sunday of Advent invites us to recognize  
that these endings are connected;  
that the Christ who will return at the end of time  
somehow inhabits each ending we experience in this life.  
Every year, Advent calls us to practice the apocalypse:  
to look for the presence of Christ who enters into our every loss,  
who comes to us in the midst of devastation,  
who gathers us up when our world has been destroyed,  
and who offers the healing that is a foretaste of the wholeness he is working  
to bring about not only at the end of time but also in this time, in this place.

#### **Blessing When the World is Ending**

Look, the world is always ending somewhere.  
Somewhere the sun has come crashing down.  
Somewhere it has gone completely dark.  
Somewhere it has ended with a slammed door, a shattered hope.  
Somewhere it has ended with the utter quiet that follows the news  
from the phone, the television, the hospital room.  
Somewhere it has ended with a tenderness that will break your heart.  
But, listen, this blessing means to be anything but morose.  
It has not come to cause despair.  
It is simply here because there is nothing a blessing is better suited for  
than an ending, nothing that cries out more for a blessing  
than when a world is falling apart.  
This blessing will not fix you, will not mend you,  
will not give you false comfort;  
it will not talk to you about one door opening when another one closes.  
It will simply sit itself beside you among the shards  
and gently turn your face toward the direction from which the light will come,  
gathering itself about you as the world begins again.

– Jan Richardson