

“Encouraging Words for Hard Times.”

In last Sunday’s Gospel reading, Jesus and his Disciples were in the Temple at Jerusalem, teaching, preaching, and (hopefully) trying to stay out of trouble. At the beginning of *today’s* Gospel reading, Jesus and his Disciples are leaving the Temple; as they do so the Disciples are admiring the building.

And well they might. For one thing, the Temple was beautiful: It sat atop a mountain and was clad in white marble, and decorated with gold on the outside; it must have been blinding in the sunlight. And the inside was spectacular as well: adorned with gold, silver, crimson, purple, and finely polished cedar, with great columns supporting a high ceiling.

For another thing, the Temple was huge. In recent years, archeologists have uncovered individual stones from the Temple weighing as much as 500 tons, and the Jewish historian Josephus tells of even larger stones at the base of the Temple’s foundation.

And, what’s more, the Jews believed the Temple was the dwelling place for God on earth— a kind of divine pied-à-terre.

And so, for these reasons and more, the Temple in Jerusalem— and quite possibly the whole city itself— came to be a powerful symbol of Jewish faith, culture, and hope; but especially it was a symbol of Jewish *identity*.

Anyway, right after the Disciples have been admiring this wonderful place, Jesus says to them:

“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2).

The effect of these words on the Disciples would have been similar to Jesus having delivered a collective punch to the solar plexus of everyone within earshot.

So, it would come as no surprise that this sudden and unexpected pronouncement has the Disciples extremely upset, and so at the earliest opportunity they quiz Jesus about this:

“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” (Mark 13:4).

On one level they may be hoping that, with more information, they might be able to do something to avert this catastrophe. But on another level, *I think they simply want to be reassured*. And that’s when Jesus makes this very strange declaration:

“Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and *rumors* of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth-pangs” (Mark 13:5-8).

And it goes like this on for another 28 verses! It’s really a very puzzling part of Mark’s gospel. And the reason for that is because, when Jesus begins to respond to the Disciples’ concerns, the style of writing changes from simple narrative to what’s know as apocalyptic writing. In fact, this part of Mark’s gospel is referred to by scholars as “The Little Apocalypse of Mark.”

There are other examples of apocalyptic literature in the Bible: in Daniel, Zechariah, and Joel; in the Revelation to John; *and* in the other Gospels. And apocalyptic writing usually shows up when the people of God are in extremely bad situations. And the bizarre and often cryptic language contained in apocalyptic writing— like the violent imagery of war in heaven, and devouring monsters, and giant trampling statues, and plagues of locust— were all meant to be comforting and consoling. And if you’re wondering how that all works, you wouldn’t be the first to ask.

Well, the often hidden meaning contained in apocalyptic writing served as a reminder that, even though it looks like the world is out of control, God is still in control. And even though it looks like God has forgotten all about the mess we’re in, everything that’s going on is part of God’s plan; God has not forgotten about

his people; God is still in charge, and goodness and righteousness will triumph over evil in the end. So, take heart! Communicating all this was the purpose of apocalyptic writing.

Now, it helps to realize that the audience to whom Mark was writing, was going through a time of great persecution. Their's was the great age of the martyrs for Christ, and people never knew if or when they'd be called upon to offer the ultimate sacrifice. And, in fact, the Temple, and the entire city of Jerusalem had already been destroyed— and destroyed in a campaign designed by Caesar (and I quote):

“to leave future visitors to this spot no reason to believe that it had ever been inhabited.”

And so, for the readers of Mark's gospel, who thought the world was literally coming down around them, these strange passages sought to assure them that God was still at the helm of the ship.

And while apocalyptic utterances might have worked in the first century, they somehow ring hollow in the 21st. For, when a woman drives her car through a crowd of parade spectators in Stillwater, or when militants murder and injure hundreds of innocent bystanders in Paris, to be told that this is part of God's plan, or that God is still in control, isn't very satisfying.

However...

Several years ago, I sat with a woman in an intensive care unit in a hospital in Kansas City. Her name was Ardis and her husband was dying, and the doctors were finally going to remove all of the life-support appliances. He was way too young to be dying, but nothing else could be done. And so, Ardis and I sat together next to his bed for several hours, talking, praying, reminiscing, laughing, crying, and so on. Eventually, Ira's heart stopped beating, and we left.

Later, Ardis would tell me that, even though she absolutely hated losing her husband at such an early age, she knew without a doubt that God had been with her throughout that time.

I think that, if the author of Mark's gospel were alive today, he might have something different to say to us. To someone like Ardis he wouldn't say “This is all part of God's plan.” Rather, he'd probably say something like, “As awful as it was to go through all that, God was still with you throughout that process.”

And that, my friends, may be my take on our reading from Mark's gospel: that whatever awful thing we're going through is *definitely not* part of God's plan, but God is still with us throughout that whole process. And God is with us in myriad ways— just waiting for us to notice.

And while I don't know about you, I do take some measure of comfort from that.

Amen.