

A Little Apocalypse

By

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Psalm 16:5-11

⁵The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. ⁶The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. ⁷I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. ⁸I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. ⁹Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. ¹⁰For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. ¹¹You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”² Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”⁵ Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray.⁶ Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.⁸ 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.

The word “Apocalypse” used to be mostly a religious word, a biblical word, a profoundly nuanced word about the final revelation of God in human history. Apocalyptic writings anticipating the End Times date to early Judaism. During seasons of exile and devastation, the prophets pointed to a cosmic cataclysm by which God would destroy the powers of evil and raise up the righteous messianic kingdom. But as you know, dramatic, apocalyptic speech has become more mainstream and is likely now used more in the secular world than the religious. We can be confronted with Apocalyptic speech in discussions on any number of issues - from fears about Artificial Intelligence, climate change, the threat of more pandemic diseases, to political crises both here and abroad. Look at a picture from Gaza these days, and you are likely to see a child’s eyes looking back at you from what must feel like the Apocalypse.

According to two scholars working together – Erik Bleich who studies the ancient world, and Christopher Star who studies press coverage of contemporary concerns, Apocalyptic language is currently soaring. Today’s high usage of apocalyptic speech carries the same purpose NOW as in ancient times. To envision the End of the World, they say, helps people articulate our deepest anxieties, our anxious fears, our yearning for hope. They quote a Pew Research Center poll from a year ago that found thirty-nine percent of those polled believed they were living in the end times; while ten percent believed Jesus would *definitely* or *probably* return in their lifetime. They note the scientists responsible for the Doomsday Clock, who track critical threats to human existence, have ordered today’s threats as closer: nuclear war, climate change, biological threats and Artificial Intelligence.¹ They conclude - because ours is a time in which the future is coming at us fast, and we are unsure of what the implications mean, increasing Apocalyptic

¹ Kristen Rogers, “The Doomsday Clock Reveals How Close We Are to Total Annihilation, CNN, 1/23/24.

Speech in the secular world now correlates directly to rising levels of loneliness, generalized fear and anxiety.²

More people are asking: Are these signs of the end of the world? Do we foresee a future of a scorched earth void of life? It is into these seasons of earth-rending change and upheaval that the Bible utters apocalyptic speech. It may sound – at first - all doom and gloom; but paradoxically, it is God’s answer to our doom and gloom! Apocalyptic visions are meant for hope.

Our reading from Mark's gospel is part of a chapter biblical scholars have termed *the Little Apocalypse* because Jesus is talking about the end times. At first glance, he paints a strange and troubling picture because it darkly portends cataclysm, and because Jesus rarely uses such language. I almost feel like I should apologize to our sixteen new members, bringing with them eleven children and youth, by joining the church today. We welcome them into this wonderful church, and then turn to a lesson about how the whole religious edifice will come tumbling down! However, the truth is this lesson speaks to the deepest levels of why we commit and invest in the church. It is a call to hope.

Jesus and his disciples were coming out of the Temple in Jerusalem – that big, impressive structure which, like this one, sat in the middle of a busy intersection in peoples' lives. It provided the sacred space in which people of faith acted out their commitments. One of the disciples made a perfectly innocent comment about its grandeur, the beehive of communal gathering it provided. To this gracious observation, Jesus replied: "You think so? Well, let me tell you something. Not one stone will be left here upon another; all of it will be thrown down." It’s as if he is saying, “Don't start thinking that this temple merits our worshipful attention, no matter how important it appears.” “Don’t forget the church does its work, and always has, with a cataclysmic end in mind, a

² Erik Bleich, Christopher Star, How ‘apocalypse’ became a secular as well as religious idea, May 2, 2024, Middlebury.edu.

devastation we cannot even fathom...but are meant not to fear. The despair you experience today will be redeemed.

Mark's community would have heard in Jesus' ominous words, this dark and scary sounding vision was less a prediction of trials to come, as it was a snapshot of their present trouble. They already knew persecution under the boot of Rome, fearful suspicion about who could be trusted; concern about corruption in both religious and secular arenas. In Jesus' day, religious leaders were offering an easy salvation with no cost and no suffering; some were trying to wed the faith to national identity and thus offering a patriotic ideology, people claimed to belong to God, but their lives reflected none of God's love, mercy, justice and peace. They were already worried about the destruction of the world as they knew it, ever on the brink of a new war. All of the insecurity human beings can have about what was happening in their world was already there in Mark's day, as in ours.

So what were they, and what are we, to conclude from Jesus' facing the doom and gloom with even greater threat of cataclysm, of wars and hurricanes and famines? Is it a warning that the chaos, the anxiety, the fear we experience is the beginning of an unfortunate end? No! And this is the remarkable thing about Jesus' Little Apocalypse. This image of total devastation, resounds with hope, because it does not give up on the future. Rather, through the darkness, it points to a future bright with possibility. "This," Jesus says, "is but the beginning of the birth pangs." Not the beginning of the end, but "the beginning of the birth-pangs!" The beginning of a new beginning!

The power and meaning in these end-of-the-world kind of words is they take seriously the reality of present fear and anxiety, even suffering. There is no denial of the uncertainty and insecurity so many feel. But they also promise that in the economy of God's creation, everything has a purpose. We are called not to despair, but to hope for the anticipated dawn of God's new day. Entrusted with hopeful Apocalyptic language, the Bible speaks to our moments of uncertainty, because Jesus puts the

word “birth-pangs,” at every ending. For those who worry that our ongoing division and polarization is unraveling our social fabric; and those who feel like things we counted as stable are coming unglued; for those who grieve the hard realities of climate change, and cannot imagine a sustainable long-term future; for those who are living with trauma or grief or illness or a relationship breakdown or major disappointment - anything that feels like dead-end, the Apocalyptic word for that, according to Jesus is.... birth-pang. When the future looks really bleak or scary, according to the Bible, God is giving birth to something new. You see, this Apocalyptic speech points through what feels grim to signs of joy and wonder. The scariest of moments - extreme uncertainty, the chaotic storms of life, even death, in God’s view are avenues for the birth of something new.

In a remarkable essay entitled, “Small Wonder,” Barbara Kingsolver tells a story from a remote province of western Iran. The story begins with a wife and husband walking home from a morning’s work in the wheat fields. They talk and laugh as they walk, until they see approaching the teenage girl who was left in charge of the village babies. She is crying, and tells them that while she was tending the infants, their toddler wandered off, and she can’t find him. The mother and father return to their small home, look in all the hiding places, calling their child’s name, then to the neighbor’s, the entire village. He was gone. A party of neighbors sets out into the rocky, arid outskirts; they comb the hills. Night falls. He is only sixteen months old. They keep searching finally going up into the mountains to search the bear caves, fearing the worst. At the fourth or fifth cave, they hear a voice, a cry. Slowly, cautiously they enter, smelling the distinct aroma of a bear. Their eyes adjust to the dark and they see the bear - not crouched to attack. It’s a she-bear, lying against the wall of the cave, curled around the child, protecting him from these fierce intruders.

Unbelieving myself, I looked the story up and found it in *The Boston Globe* from some years ago. “Iranian toddler found safe in bear’s den after three days...” the story began. “A mother bear appears to have

cared for a missing 16-month-old Iranian toddler who was found safe and sound in the animal's den," a local Iranian newspaper reported. The child's parents, from a nomadic tribe in western Lorestan province, returned to their tent after working in the fields to find him missing. Three days later, a search party found the toddler, who it said had probably been breast-fed by a mother bear, in a den about six miles from their nomadic settlement. A medical exam showed the toddler was in good health," the daily said.

"What does it mean?" Barbara Kingsolver asked, "How is it possible that a huge, hungry bear would take a pitifully small, delicate human child to her breast rather than rip him into food? She goes on, "You could read this story and declare it impossible," in our cynical world of anxiety and depravity, even though many witnesses have sworn it's true. Or you could read this story - which at the outset spelled disaster - and remember - how warm lives are drawn to one another in cold places, the unconquerable force of a mother's love and the animal's instinct to protect, the fact of the DNA code that we share in its great majority with other mammals - you could think of all that and say, 'Of course the bear nursed the baby.' He was crying from hunger, she had milk. Small wonder."³

Kingsolver says this story must come from "some gentler universe than this one," and so it might appear, except when filtered through the Apocalyptic lens of Jesus. When it looks like we are headed for disaster, and some even wonder if life as we know it is coming to an end, when insecurity, uncertainty and fear are overwhelming, remember that, according to Jesus, each disastrous ending is followed by birth-pangs. The promise of this text is that God is forever doing something new and every ending is a hopeful new beginning.

AMEN.

³ Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder*, p4ff.