

The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
November 17, 2024  
The Rev. Buddy Stallings

In the name of God: the one who Creates, Redeems, and Sanctifies. AMEN.

"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."

Well, and a good, happy morning to you too! Thank you, Scott, for choosing this day to have me preach. Particularly this year. Statistically, half of us think the end has already come, and the other half is dancing in the street! Yippee. This should be such fun.

What hearing these words this morning actually means is that Advent is coming, a season, which ends in joy beyond measure and begins with a stormy, apocryphal lament. We have spent a year with the Gospel of Mark, the narrative I love the most. It is short, anxious, and worried—sounds a lot like me, except for the short part. The first written and the least certain, Mark is the gospel of choice for those of us who admit to knowing very little, hoping a lot but certain of only the barest details. On Advent One—two weeks from today, we shall transfer to the poetry and beauty of Luke, preparing ourselves for his singular birth narratives that so gorgeously and joyously, even if mythically, fill in all the details.

But enough of this trip through the lectionary, what on earth are we to make of all this? First, a very brief recap of the context for Mark's writing, which most likely occurred just after the destruction of the Temple.

- For nearly 400 years, the people of Israel had been occupied in one way or another, beginning with Alexander the Great in 300 BC.
- Tensions with Rome, the occupying force at the time of Mark's gospel, had boiled over, one of the Roman-Jewish wars (also known as The Great Revolt) having begun in 66 AD.
- Zealots pledged to fight to the end; clerics and the aristocracy wanted it both ways, and Rome was growing more and more weary of the troublesome Jews.
- In 70, Titus launched a deadly siege on the city of Jerusalem with the help of 60,000 soldiers; a huge bloodbath ensued (Josephus, the ancient historian claims that a million Jews died), and the Temple was destroyed.

Such was the world in which Mark was writing. The temple was the center of life for God's people, certainly for Jews who were remaining true to Judaism but also for those Jews,

who were early followers of Jesus, who were just beginning to think of themselves as Christians. It is difficult for us to imagine something that signifies for us in precisely the same way. Regardless though, what we do know is that just as we are, the people of this time were desperate to achieve some sort of understanding of the world around them. The genre of writing and thinking we know of as apocalyptic was tailor-made for this zeitgeist. Long in search of a paradigm that showed them a way out of their circumstances, the apocalypse, though temporarily traumatic, would offer ultimate relief, re-ordering, the bringing of all things new. Some destruction along the way was just the price to be paid—or so went the thinking. Little wonder that the Jesus of Mark's gospel was remembered to have said, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Mark used Jesus' words to describe precisely what Mark saw around him. These words were less predictions for the future than observations of the immediately and tragically present. Mark, Paul, and probably most other inchoate Christians believed that Jesus was about to return, any day, any time. The intolerable circumstances of their lives gave birth to the notion that Jesus' return would be literal, soon, and restorative. From that conceit, the notion of the Second Coming, as it is now generally understood in much of Christianity, was derived.

But are we bound to that version of our destiny? Must it define our understanding of what the Second Coming means? Through the years, many before and currently with us have interpreted present signs as evidence of this doomsday inevitability. Admittedly, our current political upheaval, the wars in the Middle East, and climate change that feels existential to me have made me wonder as well. But in my saner, perhaps more faithful moments, I do not believe that all history is being hurled toward such a climax. Nor do I believe that our creed or orthodoxy requires that we accept only this interpretation of the fullness of God's plan for us. Jesus never claimed that God wants us simply to endure here on earth while waiting for the reward in the next life. He said, "The kingdom is now; the kingdom of God is within you."

In a profound, but somewhat abstruse way, considering these apocalyptic words more broadly makes them even more important for us. Our lives are to be lived out with the urgency inherent in Mark's ancient words not that we might be saved for future reward but that we might live now in the fullness to which God in Christ has called us by doing our part to bring God's realm on earth. That does not deny the idea of a secure future with God but recognizes that God's time is past, present, and future. Somehow mysteriously, we live in that sense of eternity even now—yes, we know that all that is to be is not yet, but the present moment is indeed the occasion of God in our lives for it is in these moments that the Second Coming occurs again and again all around us.

The passage from Hebrews, a writing that occurred about the same time as Mark's gospel, gives us a sense of how to do this. "We live this moment in full assurance of faith," the writer claims, "holding fast to the confession of our hope." The confession of our hope—aren't those wonderful words? And how do we do that? The writer of Hebrews says, we do it by "provoking one another to love and do good deeds, not neglecting to meet together," but by being together, "encouraging one another."

Thinking people on both sides of our great political divide admit that these are perilous times. How we live through them reflects our faith and the confession of our hope, And now speaking just for myself, I can say that it is far from easy. I admit that I am never going to concede most of the issues about which I feel so strongly and probably will never really understand how people I love so much can believe so differently. But I don't have to understand. What I must do is to love, presenting myself as often as I can to altars just like this one, where whoever we are and whatever we believe, we are one body, called by God in Christ to unite as one body in love and do good deeds. It is that simple and that profound: together, onward in hope we are called to go.

In the name of God: AMEN.