

Sermons at St Paul's

The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

You might be forgiven if you think that today's lessons are dark and scary. They are. They are the Scriptural versions of what movie makers now call "prequels." In other words, they tell us what happened about the story we already know before we knew what happened in that story. Am I making myself clear? No? Let me try to explain. There's an important lesson in all this.

Each one of them tells us about a "dark and stormy night" – also known as an apocalypse in Greek – that will sweep in during the unspecified future. And woe to those who must try to live through it. This was a pretty common literary form during the centuries before and after Jesus' life, and many writers tried their hand at it. *Apocalypse* comes from a Greek word that means uncovering, which is why the Great Apocalypse, the last book in our Bible, is also called Revelation.

Apocalyptic Biblical literature is meant to be imminent warning that the Messiah is coming. Mark calls the dire events that foretell its arrival "birthpangs" -- which was standard language in his era for many Jews' conviction that things could not get much worse than the Roman occupation of Israel, and that God would intervene by sending the Messiah.

The Book of Daniel, from which our Old Testament reading is taken, refers to the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, as well as to the prophet Daniel's vision of the future and the final battle that would make all things just and right. The letter to the Hebrews ends with the phrase "as you see the Day approaching" – the Day of the Lord's return.

What all these prophecies have in common is a conviction that in the face of intolerable oppression, God will be faithful and save God's righteous people. Each one may well have been written after the storm had passed. There is some scholarly opinion that the Book of Daniel was written long after the Babylonian kingdoms had faded. Mark's Gospel was probably written after 70 AD -- after the Romans destroyed the Temple Herod had built.

Remember I called these prequels? What they were was part of a literary tradition that put prophecy into the mouths of persons who were sufficiently distant in time to have credibility in predicting them. Am I denying that Daniel and Jesus were prophets? Not at all. But in our era, prequels need to be named, if we are to understand why such dark lessons seem to be appropriate readings in the time leading up to Advent.

Next Sunday is the last Sunday of our "green season" of Pentecost, and the Feast of Christ the King. The Sunday after that, November 29th, is the First Sunday of Advent in our church calendar. It is New Year's Day, and we will begin using the lessons for the third of our Lectionary Years, Year C.

So our lessons point us not only to "the end of times" but also to the beginning of our new church year. Mark says that the new era, the age of the Messiah, will be marked by birthpangs. And indeed, there have been many for our church: the destruction of the Temple, the

dispersion of the Jews and Christians, the end of the Roman era, Constantinople, the Holy Roman empire, the Norman conquest of England, the Reformation, Elizabethan Covenant, the European settlement of North America – the list goes onward.

And what do we do? How do we, the faithful, respond? The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us: ***“The Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days... I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”***

You see, we who know more about history and the dark than we would like to know, have a strange and wonderful gift. We also know God’s laws written into our hearts and minds. We will endure. We will teach our children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren about what faithfulness means.

So when a nightmare like the six linked attacks in Paris happen in our world, we Christians have a double vision. If this is a modern Apocalypse, we understand both that those whose hearts are dark with violence and terror are revealing themselves, and that it is in such a world that the church is called to action. We must reassert God’s eternal laws of love and hold tight to our sense of justice.

Remember that the word apocalypse means to uncover what is hidden, and revelation of truth. If there is darkness and sin to be uncovered, let it be overcome by the light and love of God’s grace. If the church is to stand for anything, it must stand for justice and peace in the name of God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that the church is like a huge picnic on the bank of a beautiful river, with food and hospitality for everyone. And when someone sees a baby floating down the river, strong people must wade into the river and rescue the child, warming and caring for it until it is safe and well. And if someone sees a second child floating down the river, that child must be rescued, too. After it is safe, the adults then leave the picnic, and begin marching up the river bank to see who is throwing children into the water, so they can put a stop to it.

Yes, Paris must heal. And the church must begin to march up the river bank.

The end of this year is coming. A New Year is about to begin. Let us, by the grace of God, move forward in love, to uncover the darkness and bring light and justice to hearts that are aching and bodies that are sore in every part of our world. This is the moment for wisdom, discernment, and careful effective action on the part of our leaders. It is a time for our own uncovering of what is in our hearts, and revelation is the work of our hands. We do not want our grandchildren writing about our time as a prequel to darkness, but as a prequel to light. We have work to do.

Let us prepare, friends, for the coming of the one who will heal all things and bring peace that the world cannot give, Jesus our redeemer. And let us prepare ourselves to be the ones who will carry his love and light to all who so desperately need it.

Amen.