

Proper 28 YB 2024 Mark's Apocalypse

Apocalypse

By the Rev. Salying Wong

We end where we began. A year ago at Advent, we were here, in Mark 13, in what is known as Mark's apocalypse. And now we end the year in the Gospel of Mark back in chapter 13, in that same apocalypse. Mark's gospel—without birth narratives, without resurrection scenes, without elevated poetry—is not a lesser gospel for the lack. In fact, it is a tightly constructed powerful revelation, like someone who turns on the lights in a dark room, all at once. It is an apocalypse.

Apocalypse, as many of you know, means unveiling or revelation. Remember how the light turned on, all at once in the Gospel of Mark? It was at the River Jordan, when Jesus came up from the water of baptism. There was a shriek behind the veil between heaven and earth. A raptor-like dove shredded that veil with its talons and the light poured out from heaven. The bird of the Spirit emerged from the veil soaring, took a turn in the air, before it folded its wings into a full stoop, and plunged into Jesus. The love of God took possession of Jesus, possessed him as the Son of God, and he now had the power of the Holy Spirit to throw off the veil on hidden realities, to shine a light in the darkness. The kingdom of God was now at hand.

Turning on the lights means seeing the cobwebs, the dead things in the webs. The first things that Jesus exposed were the demons, the forces of evil that possessed God's people, who made them sick in the body and the mind. He casted them out. It was all very impressive. But demons were easy compared to his ultimate goal.

Today, we meet Jesus at the end of his journey in Jerusalem. Here, Jesus has a more gnarly apocalypse to give. Jesus has come to the capitol, the

heart of power, to reveal the depth of violence in the human heart. With our powerful brains, we are able to fashion anything, from great buildings to great stories of deception. So, we deceive ourselves that we can save ourselves from our own violence by our intelligence and by the practice of a superlative obedience to moral law or religious ritual. In Jerusalem, Jesus confronts the moral majority—the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the scribes. He shows that even the so-called best of us are violent in the heart. They will crucify him when he challenges their power, their privilege, their high self-estimation.

So, he tells his disciples, who are in love with the magnificence of the power and wealth of the temple, “You see all this? You like the tall buildings and the large stones? It’s all coming down. Not one stone will be left on another.” Indeed, this would happen in the year 70. The factions of Israel—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots and the Scarri—end up in political civil war. They fight with each other about their relationship with Rome. The Sadducees want to befriend Rome. The Pharisees hesitate about their chances of success against Rome. The Zealots break away from the Pharisees and revolt against Rome. The Sicarii (who come after the New Testament) are guerilla terrorists, killing anyone, Roman or Jew, who disagree with their agenda of a free Israel. Their civil war weakens them so much that when Rome comes, Jerusalem is not ready. Rome surrounds them, starves them, slaughters them, and burns everything down. Except for the western retaining wall of the Temple Mount, “not one stone is left upon another.”

Hear an account from Josephus, who witnessed the horrors (from, *The Jewish Wars*, 5:10): "The roofs were filled with women and small children expiring from hunger, and the corpses of old men were piled in the streets. Youths swollen with hunger wandered like shadows in the marketplace until they collapsed. No one mourned the dead, because hunger had deadened all feeling."

The person or community who wrote the Gospel of Mark wrote it 10 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. In a way, this Gospel is a meditation on

what such horror means in light of Jesus' ultimate apocalypse—that being his crucifixion and resurrection. What did Christ accomplish? Certainly not peace on earth. Certainly not the end of our warring ways. What does it mean that Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God? Where is it?

I've thought about this a lot. My current working theology is that the Kingdom of God is not a place, not a means to power and control, and not an easy solution to our very complicated life as humans. Instead, I believe the Kingdom of God is a way, a practice in imitation of Christ. He took his place among those who suffered under the powers that be. He revealed the violence of institutions, nations, and even the human heart and the unspeakable horrors we do to each other. Humanity is wont to ask, when we witness terrible violence, "Why would God allow such a thing?" In the heart of this question is the fantasy that if we were as powerful as God, we would not allow such violence. But, really, would we? Would we be capable of handling so much power without violence?

Instead, Jesus rejected grabbing onto such powers even at the cost of his life. He invites us to imitate him, going so far as to say, "Those who would follow me must pick up their own cross." If we do not imitate him, we will imitate the powers around us. That is another revelation.

So where is God in the midst of all that is painful in our world? God is in the midst of the practice of the way of Jesus: refusing to imitate the powers that destroy and standing among the lowly. All other ways are not good news. It is just more of the same.