

25th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.14.21

Daniel 12:1-3

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” 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?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “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...” (275)

Anne Azema is the soprano with the Boston Camerata. This is a choral group whose focus is 19th century music, mostly folk music. She was the one who said this thing to me.

We were at the Shaker village in Sabbathday Lake, Maine, which is the only currently living Shaker village, the home of the two Shakers. When I was there, in the summer of the year 2000, there were six. We’d come from Boston, the singers of the Boston Camerata and some singers of the Harvard University Choir, of which I was one, having volunteered for this gig. We were to record an album of Shaker music—the Shaker family, the Camerata, and these members of the “U Choir.” For those several days, we would live together on their family grounds, stay in the communal housing, and eat in their communal dining room. We’d record in their worship space, as lively a room for sound as this one is.

I enjoyed my time there. The beauty of the place, the simplicity of the architecture, the lived theology of equality in community, the joy of shared meals, the kindness of the Shakers (if less so the Harvard students): it was a lovely few days, if you were to ask me.

For what it’s worth, Shakers are innovative and current in their thinking. They’re not separatists. Their living in community isn’t about making a separation from the rest of the world, but about their commitment to shared property and equality among their members. We make a mistake about them when we think of them as “quaint.” We also make a mistake about them

when we talk in terms of how many of them there “are left.” They’re celibate, and they’re open to new members. Theirs has always been a practice that sustains by people joining them. So, there are two Shakers now, but who knows what the future holds?

Truth be told, though, in recent decades, few have joined them. They’ve long since stopped taking orphans, which is how the eldress when I was there became a Shaker, Sister Frances arriving as a ten-year-old in 1938. In the year 2000, she’d recently written a memoir, *Growing Up Shaker*, which Anne had read, the soprano of the Camerata. She mentioned it to me one morning over breakfast. She said it was a sweet read, a sad read. “It’s a memoir of grief,” she summed it up.

This struck me, surprised me—though why it surprised me seems so foolish now. I hadn’t seen much reason for grief in Frances’ life as a member of this warm, committed community. But, of course, I realize now that I’m older: of course. This thing she loved, and which had saved her life, or at the very least had given her, her life, was declining. It wasn’t loved as she likely thought it should be loved. It wasn’t loved as she so apparently loved it.

Why? Why did no one love this life as she did?

Mark remembers Jesus’ teaching of the end that’s yet to come late in the gospel narrative, in the 13th of its 16 chapters. Here, we are in the middle of the last week of Jesus’ life, in the middle of his portentous week spent in Jerusalem, in and out of the Temple. Three days from now Jesus would be crucified. Five days from now Jesus would rise and live, going ahead of the disciples as ever he’d done. The end that was coming was not quite the end the disciples would feel it to be, neither Jesus’ end on the cross nor, apparently, the end that could seem to have come when Rome at last crushed Jerusalem, its Temple, its people.

Maybe they ever are—these ends. Maybe they never are quite the cut off they appear to be in their dreadful approach.

This passage is called the Little Apocalypse, which we should hear in contrast to the Great Apocalypse, the book, the Revelation to John, both though being revelations, which is what an apocalypse is. That’s Greek for revelation, as in what is revealed as eternal and transcendent and abiding when all of contingency finally collapses and breaks down, when all of the known world, the *built* world of human ingenuity and imagining, dies off or burns off, like fog on a cold morning, chilled air over yet warm earth. What is it that abides when seemingly everything has been stripped away, wiped away? Does anything? Light? Time? Love?

Apocalyptic literature is literature of such revelations, literature that explores what might yet endure beyond social upheaval and breakdown. As such, it tends to come to us from times of

such upheaval and breakdown. Like the book of Daniel, one of the earliest books of apocalyptic, like what you find at the end of the gospel narratives, like the Revelation to John, like so much literature and story-making these days: *Dune*, *Mad Max*, *Hunger Games*, *Squid Games*.

One wonders why so much output of it now.

This, Mark's Little Apocalypse, speaks to us from a time of social and political breakdown, the rub between the empire and the people who lived in the Temple-state coming now to blister and burn. Mark's gospel comes to us from when the Temple had just been attacked and destroyed, burned at the foundations, thus making those great stones easier to tear down off one another, a technique developed and perfected Rome. Jesus speaking here according to Mark is from a less disrupted time, forty years earlier or so, when Rome was only beginning its crack down on this little holding in its vast territory—little but insurgent. The Jews had had a long history by now of pushing back against their imperial overlords as those imperial overlords imposed themselves just because they could, for the lulz in today's parlance.

Two centuries earlier still, when it was the Greeks who reigned, the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus IV Epiphanes made moves to put a statue of himself in the Temple of the Jews, a Temple that was to be for the Lord and the Lord alone. A desolating sacrilege, it would come to called, this imperial move that some among the people would not stand for. The Maccabee brothers would take this as a trigger finally to revolt, these whose name is Hebrew for hammer. With a name like that, what choice did they have? Their armed insurrection would be victorious, for a time, and it would give the world the holiday Hannukah. They'd be celebrated, these brothers Maccabee, in the apocryphal books, 1st and 2nd Maccabees, ancient texts but not sacred texts as they are neither in the Jewish scriptures, the TaNaKh, nor in the Protestant Bible, which is the one we know and use.

What is in both the TaNaKh and our Bible is the book of Daniel, which is to say it is canonical and not merely apocryphal, and it counsels something very different. Endurance. Perseverance. Resistance but not revolt, patient resistance and not violent insurrection. Michael would take care of the problem, that great angel of the Lord, faithful to the people. Yes, things would fall apart. Danger would rule the streets. Injustice would be rampant. The people must endure, must be faithful to their charter, living amidst a social imaginary—those powerful shared ideas that hold a people together—that was all about justice, all about lovingkindness. To fight would be to lose, either because the empire would fight harder, these who had the capacity not just

to fight but also to destroy, or because to fight would be to become as the empire is, a people formed by force rather than by mutual care and sheltering love.

Jesus would counsel the same, of course. Resist, don't revolt. Endure, don't avenge. And forty years later, Mark would remember this counsel. It was counsel now all the more urgent for the imposition of the empire being all the more acute, all the more menacing. Now not the Greeks but the Romans, theirs was nevertheless a rule not about the people but about power, plain and simple, same as it ever was. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Seleucid, Rome: they were all just about power, domination through violence and even all-out war. Some were bad for the nations they engulfed. Others were worse for the nations they engulfed. A matter of degree. Same as it ever was.

Ched Myers, a scripture scholar with a particular affection for the gospel of Mark, writes of this sermon, Jesus' "Little Apocalypse," that it has two parts. "Both...reiterate the counsel of the prophet Daniel, who two centuries earlier during the Maccabean revolt had urged the faithful to resist both the imperial beast and the delusions of militant nationalism. At the heart of the sermon is Jesus' call to abandon Jerusalem because of the apocalyptic conviction that a truly just social order cannot be established by the sword. The disciples are instructed to 'wait and watch' for the fall of the powers and a genuine transformation of the world."

Wait and watch.

As it happens, these are the key words for the upcoming season of Advent. Wait and watch, for something new is coming, something *good* is coming. The throes of history are but birth pangs.

Yes, it would be a long wait. It would even be a hard wait—sometimes. But contractions come to times of rest.

We are once again waiting. For as ever, there are wars and rumors of wars. There are nations rising up against nations, and within those nations tribes against tribes. There are famines, Ethiopia's Tigray region now amidst one in all manner but in name. As ever, our days labor with painful contractions, as so much of our grand social imaginary no longer offers images and ideas powerful enough to hold us, credible enough for us to believe in and so abide together because of them. So much of yesterday's promise feels like today's disappointment, heartbreak, though tomorrow has yet fully to arrive, what's new has yet even to be a glimmer for us to see, something on the horizon that might give us hope.

Watch for it.

Watch for it!

A play I saw with the kids a couple years ago pressed this project of endurance upon us, Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, staged at Berkshire Theater Festival. It tells of an eternal family that narrowly escapes one disaster after another. Ice, flood, war, the events that befall them walk the line between myth and history, the eternal family of course representing humankind. Jack claimed at the time it was his favorite play, an opinion many of the audience seemed not to share. Each of the two intermissions had the number in the audience cut by half, people walking out as soon as the floor lights came up. The painful truth to come through the phantasmagoric: we're perhaps too tightly up against this truth to feel any delight in the phantasmagoric. It's just sort of dreadful.

Maybe you're feeling the same thing about this service, waiting for the intermission so you can sneak out the back door. The end of the church year doesn't go easy on us.

Prepare yourselves: the beginning of the church year isn't much easier. These next three weeks or so will test your endurance, *our* endurance.

Nearly every congregation of the Berkshire Association of the United Church of Christ is struggling these days, *really* struggling. A few are closing, one is merging with another, many are down to just one or two active families, one whose one active family is the pastor's family. Pastors are *really* struggling these days as the simmering problem of too few people ready to take on the regular and constant work of keeping a congregation thriving is even more pressing, the challenge now not just about thriving but surviving. Jesus said it well, the work is plentiful, and the laborers are few. I wonder if there was ever a time in the two-millennia-long life of the church when this was more true than it seems to be now.

The strange thing is, the crisis of here and now is unlike other crises that we tend to hear about. We're not at war. We're not starving. We're not oppressed. We're just exhausted. We just despair that so much of the effort we've put into our lives is not actually worth much of anything at all. It's just busywork, just busywork at which we've labored in vain. This whole project has been fool-hardly. Everyone else knows it. What's wrong with us? Why are we so late in arriving here, and why have we struggled so long not to arrive here?

Acedia is the ancient name for this listlessness, this humming anxiety, this white noise of despair. I feel it. I hear it—the sound of the apocalypse, not a bang, not even a whimper, just a hum, a signal from a far-off tower that communicates nothing.

I don't believe it.

I don't believe it. It's a lie.

One of our committed members of book group the other night asked why it is that a community such as the church, such as one of our lovely little congregations, is so unappealing to people? Why is it that so few people seem interested in being a part of a community of mutual care?

I imagine this was Sister Frances' driving question in her memoir, which I have yet to bring myself to read because I don't think I can take it. I imagine its sweet sorrow would be more than I could manage.

Because I don't know. I don't know the answer to that. I'm as baffled by the question as anyone here.

But I'm reading a really good book that's helping me understand more deeply how we got here. If we're up for a challenge, we could read it together sometime next year.

As for now, I hear the call to endurance as all the more an urgent one. There will times in worship where we're down to single digits. There will be tasks that need doing wherein we'll need five people, and we'll have three; opportunities for fellowship where it'd be wonderful to have twenty, and we'll have twelve, or two. There will be desperately needed acts of service where to have fifty people would almost be adequate, and we'll have five. This will be difficult. We will each need the strength of hope usually found in a throng of people, though now to be found in the likes of us, this meager group.

Though the particulars might be new, it's in many ways the same as it ever was. The church endures by the skin of our teeth. But I'm in.

You too?

Thanks be to God.