

*A sermon given on Sunday, November 15, 2009
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
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Apocalypse Now: Good News?

Nero fiddled while Rome burned. At least, that is the story which most of us remember learning somewhere along the way. A disastrous fire destroyed almost three quarters of the city of Rome in the year 64 A.D. Historians question the Emperor Nero's culpability in the matter. He may well have had nothing to do with the fire, but most Romans of the time blamed him anyway. That's why Nero needed a scapegoat, which is where the Christians came in. It may be that Nero did not fiddle while Rome burned, but it is historical fact that a good many Christians burned while Nero played the grim tune of persecution.

Nero set out to blame the Christians for Rome's problems, and his methods were cruel beyond the telling. Some Christians were dressed in fresh animal skins and torn to pieces by wild dogs. Others died after the manner of their Lord, by crucifixion. Still others were painted with pitch and used as torches for imperial banquets. "By the light of burning martyrs, Christ, thy bleeding feet we track," sang the old hymn, and it wasn't necessarily a metaphor.

I relate these gruesome goings-on not for empty shock value, but because I believe that understanding just how horrific things were for Christians in the late first century is key to understanding lessons like today's excerpt from the Gospel of Mark.

Chapter 13 in Mark's Gospel is one of those passages which, like other apocalyptic writings such as today's Old Testament reading [Daniel 12:1-4], speaks about the end time. It tells all about the grim disasters and trials which will come at the end of the world as we know it. We read such a passage and we flinch, thinking, "My God! That sounds horrible!" And of course it is.

Imagine, however that you were one of the persecuted Christians in first-century Rome. These people, who were being eaten and beaten and burned – they were not shocked to read of famine and persecution. We read apocalyptic passages as grim predictions of a cataclysmic future, and we can't think why it's relevant. Late first-century Christians heard such passages as the description of a present reality – they were living it! And what *they* heard was not a threat, it was a promise. They heard hope in such words as these, a few verses on in Mark 13: *If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days.* [Mk 13:20] Cut short what days? Cut short the days of suffering. The suffering will come to an end. Hopeful news to a persecuted people.

This is the context of the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of our four Gospels, and one probably written with the plight of the Roman Christians in mind. Seen in this light, many features of Mark's gospel make more sense.

In Mark 1, Jesus is driven into the wilderness and **tempted among wild beasts**. Mark's is the only gospel to mention the wild beasts, making it a temptation not unlike that of Roman Christians in the Colosseum.

In Mark 3, Jesus is **accused even by his friends of being mentally unstable**, "beside himself," possessed by a demon. Early Christians in Rome knew exactly what it was to be falsely accused, even by those they trusted.

In Mark 3 and Mark 14, Jesus experiences the **loneliness of being misunderstood by his family**, abandoned by those closest to him. When Jesus says that, more than Mary and his brothers, it is those who do God's will that are his true family, that seems harsh to us. But again, imagine a first-Century Christian who may have been betrayed by a family member. To such a one, being told that fellow Christians constitute a new, true family would have come as hopeful news indeed.

Do you see? Do see how there is another side to these grim passages? Can you sense how the apocalyptic word about destruction and chaos would actually come as a message of hope to those in persecution? These passages asserted that horrible things, indeed, would happen, but that those horrible things would bring to an end other horrible things, which were already a painful reality. The apocalyptic passages proclaimed that a faithful remnant would be gathered and rewarded. They proclaimed that Christ, victor in his own battle with death, would also bring the faithful through their time of trial.

Is it any wonder that through the ages others in despair have found comfort in looking towards the end? “My Lord, what a morning,” sang the American slave, yearning for an end to the inhumanity suffered daily, “*My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall. You’ll hear the trumpet sound ... you’ll hear the sinner moan ... you’ll hear the Christian shout, to wake the nations underground; look in my God’s right hand, when the stars begin to fall.*” Oh, for that day. Oh, for that terrible, wonderful day.

But what about us? Can apocalyptic scripture bring any good news to us? Frankly, I believe we must acknowledge that such passages are first and foremost the territory of the oppressed and persecuted. Religious people who even today are facing torture and death for their faith – these believers have a claim to the power of today’s passages which most of us will never know.

That said, perhaps there is on some scale, a message of hope here, even for those who do not live in a time or place of fearsome persecution.

Jesus and the Roman Christians were tempted in the midst of wild beasts. We, thank God, are not. Yet we may know fear or threat. Perhaps our economic survival feels at risk. Or what about those medical “beasts,” diseases untamed that still claim their victims? There are still fears and trials that can threaten to consume us or devour our faith.

Jesus and the Roman Christians were falsely accused of being mentally unstable. In our own day, Christians who take seriously the Gospel call to put others’ interests ahead of their own are likely to be derided. At best they are labeled as impractical or naïve. More likely they’ll be considered fools.

Jesus and the Roman Christians were lonely and misunderstood. Have you sometimes felt this way? Is there anyone who has not sometimes felt that few people really know what we are going through, and even fewer care?

Trials. Hardships. Lack of trust. Loneliness.

We still face them. The Kingdom, nineteen hundred years later, has not yet arrived. In Christ it has begun, and through one another and the Sacraments, we begin to experience it. But in its fullness, the Kingdom is not yet here. We know that. And that is why the apocalypse is good news even for us. *Your people shall be delivered*, says our reading from Daniel. *Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky.*

If your life is feeling pretty good these days, I invite you to contemplate today’s harsh lessons, and to allow them simply to put your own life in context. Perhaps a prayer of thanksgiving for blessings received and a renewed commitment to the sacrificial sharing of those blessings is what such readings should evoke from you or me. If, on the other hand, you find yourself in a place of trial or despair, hear the apocalyptic gospel for you: In the midst of despair: promise. In the midst of disaster: blessing. In the midst of change: hope.

My lord what a morning, My lord what a morning, My lord what a morning, When the stars begin to fall, When the stars begin to fall.