

The Final Chapter

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“Great earthquakes, famines and pestilences ... fearful events and great signs from heaven.” This morning, Jesus startles the disciples with a message that hints of history’s “final chapter.” We, as Lutheran Christians, often view such material with a suspicion usually reserved for unattended luggage emitting ticking sounds at the airport. We don’t spend a lot of time pouring over such texts. We know about the book of Revelation though may not read it much – certainly not like some church groups that spend their time trying to solve the Bible like a giant puzzle, seeking to tie down a date for the end of the world. In our second lesson, Paul speaks of those who thought that date was near, and so had become slackers, mooching off of their friends; he says, “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

I’ve told some of you of my experience in a Bible School class in which a visiting speaker was leading us through all the opaque jargon of “end times” theories – the pre-millennialists, the post-millennialists, the mid-tribulationists. Our eyes were beginning to glaze over and our minds starting to check out when it seemed he was finally coming to the end. But not quite, it turned out. “Me?” he said. “I’m a pan-millennialist.” Good grief, we thought, another strange theory. OK, so what’s a pan-millennialist? “I believe,” he said, with a dramatic pause, “... that it’s all going to pan out in the end.”

A great point of view. I happen to subscribe to it. Bottom line, all such things are in God’s hands and those are good hands to leave them in. And so, my friends, that could be the end of my sermon this morning ...

“Amen” and we all go home. Except it’s not. Because, quite apart from all of the strange theories, there *is* more going on here than we may realize

This “end of the world” language Jesus is using nibbles around the edges of what is called “apocalyptic.” And in the popular sense, there is a certain “apocalyptic” feel to the age in which *we* live. Some young people today are not having children – or are putting off doing so – questioning the

future of the world. The other day, Pastor Jonna mentioned a friend of hers who, noting the extreme weather the world is experiencing, said, “It kind of feels apocalyptic.” And then there are the fires, of course.

In the Bible, though, “apocalyptic” is a kind of writing that pops up at particular times in the lives of God’s people. Again, the book of Revelation comes to mind – along with the last half of Daniel and some other smaller pieces. Numbers, symbols, beasts and signs in the heavens. So what does apocalyptic have to say to you and me today? It’s this: God speaks to his people in this way when they are particularly threatened by structures of power, intimidated or overly impressed by systems of wealth or terrified by military threats. These scriptures note the impermanence of even the greatest human power or wealth. As intimidating and even terrifying as “the system” may be, my friends, God is more powerful and will sustain his people. And sometimes the symbolism is used to hide the message from those threatening powers while still speaking to God’s distracted people.

So why does Jesus go there this morning in our Gospel reading? As always, the place to start when trying to understand something in the Bible is context, context, context. What happens just before and perhaps after the piece you are reading? In this case, the verses right before our Gospel lesson provide a clue. There, we read,

As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

Yes, even Jesus gave stewardship sermons. And how do the disciples respond? They immediately change the subject. I mean, that’s what we do, right? “Oh, would you *look* at the beautiful stones they used to build this temple,” they say – more impressed by the grandeur of the building than by the poor widow’s generosity and trust. Even the editors of our pew Bibles miss it. I asked you to turn to Luke 21; note how after verse 4 the editors interrupt the flow and distract us by sticking a “signs of the end” header right after Jesus tries to get the disciples to notice the poor widow – and just before he then goes apocalyptic.

“As for [this temple],” Jesus says, “the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.” And then he gets to the earthquakes, famines and pestilences. That’s apocalyptic. It says, don’t be overawed by human attempts at grandeur; don’t be cowed by human displays of power. And when the disciples then ask *when* the temple would be destroyed, Jesus does two things. First, he gives a most important warning: “Watch out that you are not deceived.” Pretty good advice when dealing with “last times” speculations – as those attending the “Marks of a Cult” class are seeing. “Don’t let anyone deceive you.”

Second, Jesus answers the disciples’ question of “when” not with a date but with encouragement – because some extremely stressful and even terrifying days did lie ahead for them.

“They will seize you and persecute you,” Jesus says. “But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ... Stand firm, and you will win life.”

That, too, is apocalyptic. You see, apocalyptic is really not about figuring out dates but rather about encouragement, emphasizing that, come what may, we are held and supported by God’s good hands.

But what about us, now. *We’re* the ones sitting here this morning, scratching our heads over what Jesus is saying as we try to “unscrew the inscrutable,” as it were. Well, it’s a matter of two things: recognition and challenge: recognition that apocalyptic is sort of a literary container – a vessel constructed of numbers and symbols and signs – a vessel into which is poured a message. The challenge? To separate the container from its contents. Whenever I run into language like this – whether Revelation, Daniel, or similar things said by Jesus or Paul – I find myself asking, “So what of this is container and what is message? How do I separate the message from the container?”

Let’s begin with this: apocalyptic often simply does the same things as the rest of the Bible but with its own particular slant, its own language and style. It returns us to some constant themes found elsewhere in the Bible, but adds an apocalyptic spin. For instance, the *Old Testament* generally looks not for the end of the world but for a “day of the LORD” on which God sets things to rights within history. *Within* history; continuity. Apocalyptic also looks for God to intervene and set things to rights – but

uses language of *discontinuity* – total destruction followed by a complete restart and reboot. Is the difference perhaps just a matter of style? When God eventually intervenes, as the Bible promises, is it really going to be with a flash and a bang? Or will it be within history? Well, I'll let you think about that, because *that* question is of *secondary* importance.

More important and down to earth is another frequent message found throughout the Bible – both generally as well as in apocalyptic. And that message is God's deep concern and compassion for those who are most beaten down in the world. That, in fact, is a *major* theme of apocalyptic, second only to praise and worship of God. Remember how all this starts with Jesus trying to focus the disciples' attention upon the poor widow and her two small copper coins? Remember her? How easy it is to forget poor widows when there are impressive temple stones to admire – or fascinating speculations about the end times.

When the disciples attempt to change the subject, Jesus counters their dodging with one of apocalyptic's core messages: don't be overly impressed with structures of wealth or power. Temples? Kings and princes? Armies? They don't have ultimate staying power. Put your trust in them, and you will one day fall just as they will. And what about stock markets, power politics, a carefully curated résumé? Well you get the picture.

I've noticed, over many years, that those who are going through trying times, harsh times, sometimes brutal times, seem better able to understand these apocalyptic parts of the Bible than are those of us who are rather more comfortable. Jesus speaks of a day on which, "they will lay hands on you and persecute you. ... You will be betrayed All men will hate you because of me." And I think of brothers and sisters in Christ in China, in Iran, in North Korea and in many other such places. They read and hear passages like this in ways that you and I, who may just be comfortable and speculative armchair theologians, will never really hear or understand. For instance, they will read what is, for us, a most strange passage in the book of Revelation in which John sees an altar in heaven under which are the souls of those who have been martyred. They cry out, "How long, O Lord?" and are comforted, and are given white robes and told to "rest a little longer." A call for trust and for bearing up under crushing pressure – a call understood best by those who are going through such things.

Oh, my friends, the message of apocalyptic is relevant – most relevant – in spite of the fact that our ears may not be attuned to it. We ignore at our peril scripture’s steady drumbeat of God’s deep concern and compassion for those who are most beaten down in the world.

That concern is voiced early in the Bible, as early as Mt Sinai.

“Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.” Exodus 22.

“For the LORD your God ... defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” Deuteronomy 10.

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. ... When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, ... leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.” Deuteronomy 24.

“Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.” Deuteronomy 27.

And the theme continues:

In Psalm 146: “The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.”

In Jeremiah’s famous “temple of the LORD sermon” (of chapter 7): “If you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood ... then I will let you live in this place.”

Ezekiel 22: “In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the foreigner and mistreated the fatherless and the widow.”

Zechariah 7: “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.”

I could go on – there’s more in the Old Testament, where the people of God were in *charge* of their own culture, than there is in the New, where they weren’t – but the picture is clear. God is *deeply* concerned for those who are elbowed aside by society or simply ignored. Those who are hurting and have no one to plead their cause. And this, my friends, is the more the concern of apocalyptic than is figuring out dates for the end of the world or other such armchair theology. God hears the cry of such people. He wants us to hear it, too.

Now, not many of us sitting here this morning are among those elbowed aside or simply ignored. But there will be some – even in a congregation like St Timothy’s. And if you are one, I want you to know two things:

First, the foundation: In our Gospel lesson, Jesus speaks to his disciples shortly before his crucifixion – before his death on the cross which was for that poor widow, for the clueless disciples – and for you just as much as for anyone else. Know that you are made a child of God through Christ just as much as anyone else. When you come to communion in a few minutes, Jesus' body and blood are given for you just as much as for anyone else. That's the foundation, the place where everything starts.

Second, this place, this congregation, this gathering of God's people, is a place where your cry can be heard. God is *always* calling his people to hear and respond to such cries. God is calling *us* to hear and respond to *your* cries. Now, we Lutherans aren't very good at saying "Amen" but can we all say "Amen" to that?

You see, just as God called his people Israel to acts of mercy toward the widow, the fatherless and the foreigner "because," he said, "I had mercy upon you when you were slaves in Egypt," so he calls us to have mercy because of what he has done for us in Jesus on the cross. Can we say "Amen" to that?

Because apocalyptic does several things, after all. It brings encouragement to those who suffer; it breathes the fire of judgment upon the oppressor; but it also brings a challenge, at times a warning, to the indifferent. Like Jesus' words to the disciples. It's been said that the goal of scripture in general is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable – or at least get us to sit up and take notice. For many of us, *that* may be God's word to us this morning.

So let me end with this question. Do you, as perhaps a comfortable follower of Jesus, find yourself wondering how God might be challenging you to live? Do you sometimes wonder what causes you might want to support, what organizations or clubs you could join, how to vote, where to volunteer your time? I hope you do. And when you do, be guided by God's unchanging, unbending, unflinching concern for "the least of these, my brethren." Those words of Jesus were not totally out of the blue. Much of what he said he drew from the Old Testament. When he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, for instance, how did he respond? All three times by quoting from that book of Deuteronomy which so influenced Jeremiah,

as we heard a few weeks ago, and which was the source of several of the scriptures I quoted a few minutes ago.

So ... do we live in apocalyptic times today? In a sense, we as God's people always live in apocalyptic times, always in our final chapter – always challenged not to sell out to secular structures of wealth or power, and seeking to be of comfort and assistance to those living on the margins as we await with them the return of Christ.

God called ancient Israel to remember his mercy toward them in Egypt so that they, in turn, would have mercy on the fatherless, the widow and the foreigner. Today you and I, who have received even greater mercy in Christ, are called to pass that mercy forward as *we* encounter along the way those who have been elbowed aside and whose cries are too often met with silence.

Let us pray

Gracious God, when we are fearful and uncertain, give us courage and conviction. When we meet those who are elbowed aside and forced to the margins, give us compassion and the opportunity to help and support them. And, Lord, when we are indifferent – when we are dazzled or distracted by wealth or power or other trappings of human accomplishment – jolt us out of our complacency and comfort so that we might be a part of what you seek to do in our world today. In Jesus' name. Amen.