

Today's gospel reading from Mark is guaranteed to raise one's heart rate a bit as Jesus begins to tell the disciples about signs of the end of the age. This entire chapter in Mark's gospel is called the *little apocalypse* because it falls into the genre of apocalyptic writing. Apocalyptic literature was a special kind of writing that was very popular during Jesus' lifetime and in the early church. What "apocalyptic" means is to pull back the veil, to reveal what one might call the underbelly of reality. It uses hyperbolic images like stars falling from the sky, the moon turning to blood, and violent future earthquakes. The closest comparable literature in contemporary 21st century writing would possibly be science fiction, where suddenly you're placed in an utterly different world, where what you used to call "normal" doesn't apply anymore. So, as you listen to today's gospel reading you need to understand it is *meant* to shock. It is also very important to note, the purpose of apocalyptic literature is **not** to foretell the future as some fundamentalists would have you believe. No, the purpose of apocalyptic literature is to encourage faithfulness and patience in the **present** time, in **present** challenges. In fact, one commentator, when talking about apocalyptic literature, writes, "The premium of discipleship is placed **not** on predicting the future but on *faithfulness in the present*, especially in trials, adversity, and suffering." This is precisely what the thirteenth chapter of

Mark is about. It is also important to look at the last words of today's reading. After Jesus mentions frightening things that will take place, he says, "This is but the beginning of the **birth pangs**." **Birth pangs bring forth new life**. Apocalypse is for the sake of **birth**, not **death**. Yet most of us have heard this reading as a threat. It is **not a threat**. Apocalyptic writing is about **hope**. It is writing that suggests *falling apart* is for the sake of **renewal**, not punishment.

Apocalyptic writing reframes reality in a radical way by flipping our imagination. I love the way Richard Rohr talks about apocalyptic writing. He says:

We would have done history a great favor if we would have understood apocalyptic literature. *It's **not** meant to strike fear in us as much as a radical rearrangement*. It's **not** the end of the world. It's the end of *worlds*—our *worlds [including our little individual worlds] that we have created*. In the book of Revelation (also called the Apocalypse, or Revelation to John), John is trying to describe what it feels like when everything falls apart. It's **not** a threat. It's an **invitation to depth**. It's what it takes to wake people up to the real, to the lasting, to what matters.

So, with that in mind, let's look at our reading from Mark. The disciple's comment about the greatness or size of the temple is quite ironic because it comes right after Jesus praises a widow who gave the **smallest** of coins to the temple. Right there we can discover that what is great and what is small in God's kingdom are probably not the same as in our

kingdoms. Then, leaving the Temple for the last time, Jesus takes the disciples to the Mount of Olives which is opposite from the Temple.

Perhaps the separation of Jesus and his disciples **from** the temple can also symbolize that the "place where God dwells" is now in Jesus and his Word rather than in the building. He then proceeds to share apocalyptic words, the words we see in today's gospel reading. And, he shares these words as **everything truly is** about to fall apart for the disciples, as he himself faces betrayal, trial, and crucifixion within a matter of days.

Responding to a comment on how magnificent the Temple was, Jesus looks past the building to a time when the Temple **would** be destroyed. Indeed, the Temple was to be destroyed within a generation of Jesus speaking these words. And, by the time Mark wrote these words which are part of the first written gospel, the Jewish revolt **had** taken place and the Temple **had** been destroyed. Anyway, Jesus takes the disciples on a verbal journey to the end times, the end of worlds that are **always** before us. He focuses on symbols and events that will show the end time is about to happen. But the reason Jesus tells the disciples these things is **not** so they could pinpoint a date. It is **not** to give them a head start so they can get their affairs in order. The point Jesus was making was to watch out, be awake, be prepared, and **persevere** during the struggles that are to come.

Now, quite honestly, the early Christians truly believed that the end was near. Yet, within a decade or two, nearly all the twelve disciples would be dead, most of them having died as martyrs. Within a generation, persecution would seek to destroy the Church, even as the Temple was destroyed. The end of the world didn't come but threats to bring about the end of faith and the end of the Church were certainly on the horizon. The key was to be alert, be prepared, and persevere. Believers would have to dig deep to continue to be enthusiastic and energetic about a faith that could cost them their lives. Things were not easy for anyone who followed Jesus. Their own end could come at any time. And, quite honestly, it is the same for us.

Jesus was telling the disciples they would have to live on the edge as things seemed like they were falling apart. They would face danger and that danger would create an edginess in their lives. Their faith would have to **persevere** in times when it would be a lot easier to give up and give in to the pressures that opposed God. After the resurrection, in those early days of Christianity, as many in the first-generation Church did believe that Christ would return before they died, they lived in expectation. They lived on the edge, an edge that came from listening to Jesus' words as he told them to **keep watch, be alert, persevere, and keep the faith.**

As we look at our lives and think about Jesus' message, I am deeply aware of the way we seek comfort and security. But, quite frankly, seeking and attaining comfort and security can be very hard on faith. We **can** find our faith and our lives become **too** comfortable, too protected. Faith needs to have an element of edginess to it. **Faith** and **trust** in God during challenging times, at times when things seem to be falling apart, does require an edginess and enthusiasm as we face uncertainty. A comfortable faith in a comfortable Church leading to a comfortable life trying to make sure that our part of the world remains comfortable isn't what Jesus had in mind for 1st century Christians or 21st century Christians. I suspect that the world will not end for a long time, probably many, many generations from now. But no one can say, as an individual, that tomorrow is promised to them. The end of our world might be just around the corner. This is something we have learned anew throughout this Covid-19 pandemic.

Living out our faith while aware that our world could end tomorrow, can make an incredible difference in the way we serve God. It can make an incredible difference in the way we see others. It can make an incredible difference in the way we live our daily lives. Living on that edge, remembering our world could end tomorrow, reminds us how to truly **live!** One day the great buildings and structures of our life **will** fall. Things will

seem like they are falling apart. The very things that we often trust and rely upon to give identity, meaning, purpose, and security will crumble. This is not a prediction of the future or a forecast of doom and gloom. It is just a statement of reality. Life changes, loved ones die, institutions fail, people disappoint, relationships break up, bodies get sick. In those moments the great stones of our temples are all thrown down. Faith in Christ helps us let go of illusions and pretenses so we can be more and more present to what *is*. That's why, just a few verses later, Jesus says, "Be awake." God puts us in a world of passing things where everything changes, and nothing remains the same. The only thing that doesn't change is change itself. It's a hard lesson to learn. It helps us appreciate that everything is a gift. We didn't create it. We don't deserve it. It will not last, but while we breathe it in, we can enjoy it, and know that it is another moment of God, another moment of life. We can live, pulling back the veil to see the underbelly of reality, to see what **is, what is already here**. And, what is **already** here, is God's presence to us, **Immanuel – God with us!** That is what truly **matters** and what is **lasting**. And, this God of grace and love, who holds us and carries us through all the challenges and changes and chaos of life, calls us to live awake in the NOW, allowing the promises of God about the future to infuse our every present moment.