

December 3, 2017  
**Every Big & Little Apocalypse**  
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Mark 13:24-37

***[The Coming of the Son of Man]***

<sup>24</sup> “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

***[The Lesson of the Fig Tree]***

<sup>28</sup> “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

***[The Necessity for Watchfulness]***

<sup>32</sup> “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup> Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup> or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

For the First Sunday of Advent, the lectionaries always have a text like “Wake Up!” or “Get Ready!” or “Prepare Ye!” – like Mark 13, where Jesus tells his listeners, “Keep awake!” Mark 13 is called *The Little Apocalypse*, for how much it reads like Daniel and Revelation, that other apocalyptic literature in the Bible.

I think *Little Apocalypse* sounds like a band name, but turns out it isn't. It is, however, an album title for a Bob-Dylan-sounding alt-country band called The Schramms.

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will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, . . .*

(I know you hear all this foreshadowing of the crucifixion story)

<sup>36</sup> *or else he may find you asleep (more foreshadowing) when he comes  
suddenly.* <sup>37</sup> *And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”*

Jesus describes the end of the world. At least that's how it was taught to me growing up. Or – it's what I learned, in that particular blend of Christian faith that was white, Baptist, American, small-town, conservative and middle class. The world was going to collapse into flames ignited by the sins of bad people: Russians and criminals mostly; and post-Christian Europeans; and Ivy League radicals; California hippies; and Black Panthers; and feminists. But that wasn't to say that a 13-year-old girl child couldn't be bad enough to fall in with them, if she didn't say her prayers and witness to her friends. Good Christians would escape, but barely – with our clothes and hair singed. (It was the 70's; we were pre-millennialists.)

But then somewhere around age eighteen or nineteen it occurred to me that when Jesus' world went up in flames, HE didn't escape. He got arrested and tortured and executed – which made this particular passage in Mark 13 both MORE sensible and scarier.

It seemed like Jesus is saying that whatever this coming disaster is, it is going to get everyone, that it is going to be especially terrible for the weakest and the slowest. Women – go figure: Jesus seems to pity them most. Verse 17: *Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.*

Except, I couldn't get anyone in my college Bible study group to talk to me about this. My college minister, bless his heart – the one who told me I think too much – said *of course Jesus wasn't like THAT*. That guy is now in charge of parking operations at a state college. I sometimes wonder if he left ministry because of me. I don't feel as badly about that as I probably should. But I read and I prayed and I read some more. And I went to seminary and read and prayed and read some more; and as best I can tell, friends, Jesus was and is EXACTLY like that!

Jesus was smack dab in the middle of the tragedy and suffering of a world that is always bursting into flames somewhere. Jesus doesn't escape the fire. He walks straight towards it looking for the ones for whom the suffering will be worst – and not so much to snatch them back, but to show us how to live. And how to die. How to be human in every circumstance that comes along.

In the first beginning of the Bible, God made human beings. The crown of creation, God's very favorite animal in the zoo. The one with whom God imagined having a friendship

of sorts. God could have made us like golden retrievers: they can't choose whom they love. Mine are devoted to me – but if you opened your car door, they'd go home with you and never look back. But God made humans with power to choose: to love God – to be God's friends – or not.

Pretty risky. It went bad fast. And stayed that way more often than not. The do-over we call *incarnation* – what we celebrate at Advent – is the second beginning of the Bible. God *became* a human being. We needed closer instruction, not only on how to be the friends of God. We needed help to learn what it even means to be a human being, what we are supposed to do with these minds and hearts and bodies of ours. Because there are lots of choice, aren't there?

Read any news this week? I watched a program about child hunger in America. They interviewed a kid, about 11 years old I suspect, who told about another kid, a kid he knows at school. "*He has worse clothes than me but his family has their own place,*" he said, "*so he can go get something to eat out of the refrigerator at his house any time he wants. We don't have food at our house – only at the place where we stand in line then eat with a thousand other people, whether I am hungry then or not.*" I read about human slave markets of Libya. I felt ashamed because the story got too hard to read so I bookmarked it to finish later.

During the Civil War, there were battles where as many as 20,000 men died in one day. In the Civil War novel Cold Mountain my favorite character, Ruby Thewes, finds her friend, Sally Swanger, tortured nearly to death by Home Guard soldiers who killed her husband and sons. "*This world cain't stand long. The Lord won't let it stand like this!*" Ruby cries. In his book about the Holocaust, Night, Elie Wiesel tells nearly the same story. On Thursday afternoon Wanda and I sat drinking Turkish tea downtown, talking very highbrow theology. A child hardly older than my Emy walked by our window – drugged out and dirty, raggedy and barefoot as she could be. "*Where in the world is her mama?*" I thought.

My childhood preachers said Jesus is talking about *the rapture* in this passage – a day that may be today or another day a thousand years off – when Jesus comes to take the church to heaven. I grew up believing Jesus wanted me awake and watching so I didn't miss the get-away bus when he pulled up to rescue us all out of this mess.

In addition to watching and waiting, my job was to warn other folks about the impending danger by telling them how much God wanted them to escape too, because God loved them so much. The whole story was laced with fear and anxiety. But I thought that was because I was a child, that grown-ups didn't get afraid. I got older, but no less afraid of being, as they say, *left behind*. At the same time, I couldn't get over the simple fact that none of what I thought these preachers were saying Jesus **meant** matched how Jesus himself lived when he walked around the gospels in his own heart, mind and body. He never seemed afraid. He was never freaking out about how many people he'd warned

about the apocalypse. He was forever eating and hanging out and going for walks and getting into arguments with other Bible study teachers. His world was as mean and stupid and full of fear as our own; it was as partisan to the rich and as hateful toward the poor, as unjust and corrupt and racist and degenerate and lascivious as any culture before or since.

And when his world did burst into flames – at his last Passover holiday – he certainly DID NOT take the first bus out of town. Partly because there were no buses, obviously, but mostly because he was God incarnate. His JOB was to show us how to live HERE when life bursts into flames. He walked straight into that fire with eyes set and his chin firm; and however afraid he was, he kept going – through all the fire and all the smoke; the torture, suffering, death and grave; through the worst that humans do to one another – so that no human ever can say that God doesn't know what it's like to be me. Because God does know.

So I grew out of believing Jesus was talking only about *the rapture*. Then I went to seminary and learned from the bookish ones that Mark 13 is actually about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, that this is, quote: "*crisis literature written in the voice of Jesus forty years after his resurrection.*" "Oh," I said, "of course." I mean, I get it in the Literary Studies sort of way – but how can that really work? That's a use of the passage; but, really, how can Jesus speak in crisis literature written 40 years later? And then I grew up even more and fell into a line of work that has me visiting jails and hospitals, and parents whose kids have been taken away, and a refugee whose wife and four daughters were hacked to death in Rwanda. And, for now at least, I've resigned myself to the possibility that this passage is about every big and little apocalypse that is happening somewhere in the world all the time.

We know from the prophets and from history ever since that when the world goes up in flames, people on the right side of history don't escape just for being right. They suffer and they die with everyone else. We don't choose righteousness and justice because it is the safer course, but because it's right: right where God meant for us to be from the beginning of creation; right where we are most truly and most fully human. We only get this one heart and mind and body and voice – this one human ensemble, if you will – and this one speck of time in which to be a human being. We take ourselves out of the box and we decide what the world shall receive by virtue of us having lived.

And make no mistake, we decide! OUR lives are OURS to do with as we please. And we answer to God for that decision. Did we *keep awake* for no better reason than to stay safe? What does *safe* mean anyway? Simply not to die? If one must sacrifice one's humanity to stay alive, is one still a human being? If so, one can't possibly know anything of Christ. To be a human being finds its full expression there: in knowing my self as God's own, born of God's creative self, of God's desire to *relate to* the creation intimately. To do so, God became one of us.

A further trip no human has ever taken, a wider border no human has ever crossed. To become like the most distant stranger in order that the stranger know he or she is loved beyond all measure. That is the call that incarnation puts upon those who would follow Jesus. Once I didn't have to pretend the world was better than it is, the good news of Jesus Christ no longer scared the daylights out of me. I could see how much God loved the world by sending Jesus to us. Mean and hateful as it is sometimes, God loves it. Loves us.

Advent's when we start that story over – so we can remember and do our best to love this world too, with as much peace and joy and hope and courage as we can muster in our lives and in our life together.