

STAYING AWAKE
E. Hornbeck
November 29, 2020
First Sunday of Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Mark 13:24-37

Our reading for this first Sunday of Advent comes to us from the Gospel of Mark. It concludes this long discourse from Jesus to his followers, just before the last supper. In it, he warns that everything but everything is in the process of falling apart. He indicts religious hypocrisy and false prophets, predicts mass betrayal, destruction and violence. And then, he concludes with these words (from Mark 13):

“But in those days, after that time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will fall from the sky and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Promised One coming in the clouds with great power and glory; then the angels will be sent to gather the chosen from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of heaven. Take the fig tree as a parable: as soon as its twigs grow supple and its leaves come out, you know that summer near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the Beloved is near, right at the door. The truth is, before this generation has passed away, all these things will have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it—neither the angels of heaven, nor the Only Begotten—no one, but Abba God. Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake!” (Mark 13: 24-33)

Well, here we are, another Advent season, another new liturgical year, and another “little apocalypse”-- the official name of this discourse in our lectionary today. **And**, today marks yet another little turn in SPC’s ongoing transition journey, as it is also the last day that I will be with you, at least in my current role as Director of Spiritual Formation. I know some of you are sad, I **know** some of you are relieved, and I know some of you have no idea why I am standing here today. So, if you’ll indulge me, I’d like to begin with a little un-preacherly personal digression, just for a little a bit of context.

I was recently asked: tell your biography in 6 words. It was an ice breaker in a small group conversation that I happened to be facilitating. Full confession: I hate these things, I don’t think well on my feet, so of course, I cheated and pondered the question at length beforehand; I came up with some very good and clever words. But, when my turn came, something else came over me and I blurted out “It was all an accident—celebrate!”

I’ve been pondering this ever since. In my former life, I *was* an accidental economist, work I didn’t much care for, for almost 20 years. Then, through a whole string of apocalyptic experiences, Something shook me out of my stupor, and put me on a whole new path. During that time, in transition, in crisis, Jeff and I landed here at SPC, where, like so many wounded others, this community loved us back to life.

Around this same time, I entered a program of study in the ministry of spiritual direction, and soon after that found myself in seminary. Not because I had any

professional ambitions, *at all*, but mostly because I was obsessed with trying to understand this Something that kept showing up and upending my life. My Masters of Theology in Spirituality Studies, was a complete accident, and also a miraculous gift—getting to be part of this exciting new academic field, that focuses specifically on the study of “spirituality,” which is defined as: 1. people’s lived experience of that Something, that Ultimate Reality we sometimes call God; 2. reflection on that experience in scripture and other texts; and 3. the discrete practices that support and nurture that experience and reflection. It is a whole new lens for exploring scripture, theology, history, and maybe even being church. It offers a perspective deeply grounded in tradition while also centering the outliers — the misfits and the mystics. I could not get enough of it.

As I was finishing all that, back in the winter of 2004, Randy Tremba came to me one day and said: wanna help me plan Lent? So, I said yes. And, I just kept saying yes—to classes, and seminars, forums and workshops, retreats, vigils, fests, worship, and campus ministry of all things. So that’s how I come to be here. And, I brought all those misfits and mystics along with me. It really was an accident.

By the way, “saying yes, and” (as opposed to “no, but”-- in the words of spiritual teacher Richard Rohr) is a foundational spiritual practice in all deep wisdom traditions. Learning to say yes to this moment right here, right now, to practice saying yes in mindfulness and prayer, helps us learn to say yes in life, in all its glory and devastation, yes to all the ways the Spirit of Life shows up in it all and invites us to participate. And essential to this practice of saying yes is the practice of “staying awake” as Jesus invites in today’s apocalyptic reading.

In normal times, I think I might be tempted to suggest that apocalypse is a strange way to usher in this season of peace and joy, of angels and shepherds and cute little babies in swaddling clothes. This year, I have to confess, the invitation to “practice apocalypse” comes almost as a relief. I never noticed before, but this is an annual invitation. Every year, at least in our lectionary readings, we are invited to begin celebrating incarnation by practicing apocalypse. Incarnation, fully understood, it turns out, has already embraced death and resurrection.

And how can you say **that** without poetry, the wilder and weirder the better, which is what these apocalyptic texts really are. They are meant not so much to describe the actual end of the world, but rather invite us to embrace the reality that the world is always ending in one way or another, and that the Spirit of Life is always, somehow present in the midst of it. To practice apocalypse is to stay awake, to pay attention to signs of new life, especially in chaos, to keep asking those good spiritual director questions: where is God in all this? And what is the invitation?

Apocalypse, remember, means literally revelation, uncovering. And just think of all that is being uncovered these days: this historic pandemic, revealing how profoundly interconnected we are; a lawless administration revealing the fundamental preciousness and fragility of this whole democratic enterprise; the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others, and all the other overt manifestations of racism on hideous display, revealing the pervasive toxins of white supremacy that have always infected this American life. These are hard days, and they are holy. Because, these revelations

point us toward healing, they cry out for our participation in mending what is broken and liberating all that is in bondage. *We are* profoundly interconnected, so none of us can be free or healthy or whole until we all are.

Practicing apocalypse means to stay awake, to notice, and to join the movement of the Spirit. And the signs of new life are everywhere: in the millions of people protesting; in multitudes all across the country working so hard to defend our common life; in all the hard and painful work going on in so many places to reveal the truth of systemic racism, and explore ways to dismantle it; in all the creative ways people are discovering how to love one another in the midst of a pandemic.

Here at SPC, we've been seeking to stay awake for years, exploring all kinds of spiritual practices together—in worship, community, deep silence, listening, retreat. I'm convinced this has helped ground us, and inspired the courage and imagination to keep uncovering our particular call in the ongoing work of liberation. Claiming our identity as a More Light congregation, learning to move from inclusion to celebration of the particular gifts of our LGBTQ siblings, took decades, and continues to transform us at our core. I think *that* has helped inspire our ongoing work around racial awareness. And let me just say, that wherever you find a whole community of mostly middle-class white folks embracing, with enthusiasm, the invitation to talk about race together, as we've been doing here at SPC this Fall, I promise you, the Spirit of Life is loose in the house.

The Sunday after Randy retired, following his 43 years of ministry here, I reminded us that the Spirit has actually been at work here at SPC for a very *very* long time—we're up to 280 years now. I also repeated the favorite Tremba claim that this journey *actually* began some 4.3 billion years ago when that same Spirit first moved over primordial chaos, bathed it in light, and brought forth new life. Its what the Spirit does. And so, I say to you now: just keep awake, and keep trusting that she's right here, right now, birthing something new.

My small part of this long journey was pretty much an accident, and also -- for me -- a joy. And honestly, all I've ever *really* done, is just follow breadcrumbs through the wilderness. And for this little while now, we've been following breadcrumbs together. I trust you'll continue, as will I. Some of my current breadcrumbs include: continued involvement in the work of More Light Presbyterians; an in-depth anti-racism leadership training program; and a course of study on practicing compassion. I'm intrigued to explore the connections between antiracism, compassion and mindfulness. As usual I have no idea where this will take me. But I have learned to trust those breadcrumbs when I see them, and even when I don't.

Truth be told, I don't believe in accidents at all. I don't believe in fate either. What I guess I do believe was summed up by French mystic Therese of Lisieux, one of my most treasured spiritual teachers, in just three words: everything is grace. Everything. Sounds sappy, I know, but here's the thing-- she said this in the midst of a profound dark night experience as she lay dying a slow and agonizing death, feeling utterly abandoned by God. It was in the midst of all that that she could also say, with complete confidence and love: Everything is grace.

Writer and Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechener put it this way:

“The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.”

And, you know what? That seems like something to celebrate.

Happy Advent SPC and thank you. I love you all. Be safe. Stay awake. And trust: Everything is grace. Amen