

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The readings at the end of the liturgical year are the hardest to preach on, I think. The imagery is so foreign to us and the judgment so final that we don't really know what to make of it. We're not really expecting the stars to fall from the sky, right? How would that even work?

What we do know about is that things are changing at an accelerating rate and we wonder with increasing alarm at where it's all headed. And so, the apocalyptic tone of today's reading can strike a chord in us, even if we don't expect the sun to stop shining any time soon.

The trick to appreciating the language of today's readings is to have a hunger and thirst for things to be different. There's a beatitude about that: "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied."

Probably the worst attitude to bring to current events is "ho-hum, it's not that bad. It will blow over."

Actually, change is more likely to occur if we arrive at the point of being so thoroughly distraught that we echo Job's gut-wrenching protest against evil and the suffering of the innocent.

To understand the apocalyptic mindset you

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have to almost brush up against despair while remaining sensitive enough and hopeful enough to remain open to the Spirit's whisperings amidst the uproar of chaos.

In today's Gospel Jesus uses natural and supernatural images to speak about the confusion and turmoil the disciples will witness.

He warns them that things will no longer make sense—things as basic even as time and space will be affected. Apocalyptic visions are like that: they affect everyone. But not everyone will respond in the same way. Some people will spend a great deal of time and energy creating what they think will bring them security—much like we did in the 50s and 60s when bomb shelters seemed like the way to go.

Jesus warns his disciples to avoid that sort of behavior. Instead, he offers hope against hope.

The hope Jesus offers is the hope he lived. This is not some sort of sunny optimism based on good odds or on our own resources, but it is the certainty that God can transform any situation into an occasion of grace.

At the same time, Jesus warns us that we know neither the day nor the hour. God knows. We don't.

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Jesus went to the cross believing that God would raise him “on the third day” which meant in God’s good time, according to God’s timetable.

Jesus preached about an apocalypse to invite his disciples to share his hope, to believe that God continues to be at work on behalf of humanity even when we do not perceive it.

If we want to learn about apocalyptic hope, we will have to abandon our desire to duck and cover, to hide ourselves from the suffering of the world.

If we anesthetize ourselves and hide from suffering, we will be no better off than people hiding from an atomic blast in a windowless basement.

All we will accomplish will be to blind ourselves to what is happening—the evil but also the hidden good.

But if we are willing to face the fear, to share the suffering, to denounce the evil, and to be ready to act, then we will be able to perceive the presence of the God’s own Son in our midst, showing us the way forward, and leading us out of the darkness.