

This morning the Gospeler Mark is all about the end times: doom and gloom, fire and brimstone, earthquakes & famine, destruction and wars. Maybe a little levity is called for, to help us ease into it. I begin with a story from an Episcopal priest named Carolyn Kerns West.

“One summer when I was growing up in the little Texas town of Burnet, our Methodist church sponsored a week-long revival. My parents felt obligated to support the effort, and so the Kern family attended services almost every night. After introducing himself to the adults, the evangelist turned to the children. In a sugary voice, he asked us to call him, ‘Uncle Ralph’ and his wife ‘Miss Melinda.’ This did little to make the long, boring sermon tolerable for my brother, Paul, and me. At midweek, Paul’s best friend, Larry, wrote a message with his finger on the dusty side of the evangelists’ trailer: ‘Paul Kern *hates* Uncle Ralph.’

By the last night of the revival, most church members agreed with Paul. Uncle Ralph was a dud. Few souls had been reeled in at the altar calls, and all hopes rested on the last service. Uncle Ralph went for it – he employed every scary bit of Scripture he could muster. He painted God as a fire-breathing exterminator, [and us as the unworthy sods who may not make it on judgement day]. It was the 1950s, when fallout shelters were hatching under many suburban homes. Yet even his descriptions of a God poised to unleash a nuclear holocaust failed to move us phlegmatic Methodists from our seats.

Uncle Ralph invited us to come forward and ‘get right with God’ [before the end of times]. Miss Melinda began her trembly, soul-wrenching organ music. Everyone still held back. Suddenly, in the middle of ‘The Old Rugged Cross,’ Miss Melinda stood up with a dramatic flourish, scanned the congregation, marched into the crowd, and stopped in front of me. ‘Young lady, are you saved?’ she challenged. ‘Do you know what will happen to your soul when God sets the bomb off?’ I did what any normal sixth grader would do. I started giggling. The more stricken she looked, the louder I laughed. Huge hair bouncing, Miss Melinda fled back to the organ. A jab from my father’s elbow shocked me to my senses, but [in that moment and now decades later], I never stopped thinking it was funny.”

The Sundays leading up to the season of Advent always feature Gospel readings about the “end of times” – otherwise known as judgment day, or the apocalypse, or armageddon, or, later, the rapture. The church year begins in Advent, so it makes sense that “end of times” passages appear toward the end of the church year. But also, our Christian scriptures just work that way – the story perpetually a cycle of life, death, resurrection and new birth, over and over again. In Advent we prepare for the new birth of Christ in our midst, God born into our lives in a new way. So it makes sense with our cyclical way of thinking, right before the birth that is Advent, we’re due for some kind of death or ending. At least, on paper.

Still, most sensible people these days, even the truly devout, tend not to take apocalyptic passages very seriously. We certainly don't pick these passages to embroider and hang on our walls. Over time, we've developed a thick skin and a deaf ear. We dismiss them – and with good reason -- because so many of our Christian brothers and sisters have misunderstood and abused these passages, using them to scare and intimidate rather than encourage and build up. In her new book, *Accidental Saints*, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber tells of a reluctant parishioner in her Colorado parish. “Rapture theories are nothing *I've* ever taken very seriously,” writes Bolz-Weber. “But [my parishioner] Jim was raised with them, and on his first Sunday at church, he shifted his feet through the gospel reading about people being snatched out of fields, and God coming to crash down the temple and destroy the wicked. Jim was raised in an evangelical church, and believed what the adults in his childhood told him: that, at any minute, everyone they loved could be taken to heaven by Jesus, and if they were bad (like maybe if they were gay, or drank a beer, or stole a candy bar or said a bad word when they got a D on their geography quiz) God would leave them behind with the other bad people to be tormented for eternity as the world came crashing down.”

“I would come home from school and my mom would still be at the store and if I couldn't see anyone else on my block I'd get panicky, thinking they were gone and that I was left behind,” Jim later explained to me. “And I'd basically have an anxiety attack until my mom came home. When she got there, I couldn't even tell her why I was so upset because then she'd start to ask what I had done to deserve to be left behind.” Many of my other parishioners confessed to me this kind of fear the religion on their childhood had instilled in them,” writes Bolz-Weber. “[This is] weird, embarrassing, end-of-time stuff I'd quickly toss under sofa cushions if non-Christians stopped by for a visit and judged me as crazy before I could intercede, before I could tell them that apocalyptic tests were really common at the time the Bible was written. They were, like, available at the supermarket checkout line next to the celebrity magazines.”

And she's right. Though we might like to, there's no denying that apocalyptic sayings were everywhere in first century Judaism, handed down from a long line of prophets, and they were a big part of what Jesus talked about both in the public square, and in private with his disciples. These illustrious descriptions appear in all four Gospels, and in good number. Like Japanese beetles, they can't be denied, because they are everywhere, and they keep coming back every year and hanging on us. What are we to do with them?

In these passages, Jesus, of course, wasn't trying to predict what would come about after his death. He wasn't a fortune-teller. But he did have a pretty good idea that times would not be easy, or even tolerable, for his friends. If the Romans were willing to crucify Jesus, they would certainly be willing to do the same or worse to his followers. And Jesus was right. Less than a few decades after his death, life had become pretty gruesome for those that were left behind. In 70AD, three Roman legions

were sent to besiege the defiant city of Jerusalem. The city's walls were torn down, its buildings burned, and its temple obliterated. Mass starvation, disease, and relentless slaughter followed suit.

The first Christians who managed to survive the siege had other problems, too. As the city smoldered in ash, Nero swooped down on the fledgling, young church like a mad vulture, killing and maiming any follower of Jesus he could find. And if this wasn't enough, there was fighting among Jesus' followers themselves, with families torn apart by anxiety, fear, and conflicting loyalties. False messiahs were setting themselves up on every street corner, each of them claiming exclusive access to God. Before it was all said and done, everything -- simply everything -- fell apart. All was chaos and despair and ruin. Jesus' followers knew only a world beyond repair, the death of the world as they knew it.

Imagine, if you will, what the memory of Jesus' words must have meant to those scared, starving, persecuted people. "Yes," Jesus told his disciples, "horrible things will happen. The city will come falling down. False prophets will distract and mislead. Wars will break out, natural disasters will occur, people will turn on one another." "Yes," Jesus says, "expect horrible things to happen, and then, when you can barely breathe, still more horrible things." **But** truly I tell you," he then says, "do not be disheartened. Do not lose hope...*for the one who endures to the end will be saved.*" Just hang on, he told his disciples, do everything you can to stay the course. In the midst of your most unimaginable suffering *the center will hold. God will hold.* If you can just hang on and stay as true and faithful as you can, God will come through. Then one glorious day, God will reconcile with those who persecute you. God will destroy wickedness and pain and evil. And then out of love and compassion God will create a new day, a new reality, one of renewal and peace. All you have to do is just hang on. *The center will hold.* Can you imagine how those early Christians must have clung to that promise like their lives depended on it?

Yesterday we attended a Bar Mitzvah of a school friend at a conservative congregation in Minnetonka. Behind the bimah (altar area), facing the congregation stands a huge, glorious wall, made from local Kasota stone reminiscent of the stone that built the Jerusalem temple. High on the wall is inscribed, in Hebrew, the words: *Spread over us the shelter of Your peace.* And I was overcome by the sentiment. Yes, the temple came crashing down. Yes, the people were persecuted and almost exterminated. But in God, the center holds. Temples are rebuilt, all over the world. The people of God spring back with renewed determination and hopefulness. Like the saying found inscribed on a wall in Auschwitz:

*"I believe in the sun
even when it's not shining.
I believe in love
even when I feel it not,
I believe in God
even when he is silent."*

Even in the darkest part of human reality, the peace of God spreads over us, holds, and brings life out of death.

Maybe we would do well to interpret Jesus' apocalyptic teachings more the way the early people of faith did. Scripture like this recognizes that for each of us, our lives will – at some point – go dark, and it will feel like the world has come to an end. I guarantee you that this past Friday in Paris, for at least 129 families, the stars fell out of the sky, and their lives went dark. As the terrorists ravaged the city the world as they knew it came to an end for the victims of hate and violence.

We have all found our way to this place, to Trinity, by different ways and for many different reasons. Many of us are here looking for direction and support in how to live faithful and holy lives in the face of our everyday challenges and forms of siege. We are a community, and at any given time, there are those among us who are experiencing their own end of times. We lose a job, a spouse, a friend. We divorce, fall off the wagon, succumb to depression, suffer infidelity, fight with our families. We struggle to raise our children and grandchildren and suffer their heartbreak alongside them. And if we are children, we struggle to grow up in a world on which every street corner stands a false prophet masquerading as the truth. There are times when everything around us, all our structures come crashing down, and we are left depleted and terrified. And just when we are about to give up hope – -- is the *precise moment* when we need to hear Jesus' words: *for the one who endures to the end will be saved* – words not meant to scare or intimidate us, but rather to remind us of the loving arms wrapped around us, the peace sheltering us, and the inevitable renewal that is to come.

The passage from Mark we read this morning is not a threat, but rather a tremendous gift. We need not reduce it to a portrait of a wrathful, unrelenting, angry God whose desire it is to destroy all those who sin or make mistakes. Seriously. There would be no one left. We must always be suspect of anyone or anything that tells us that worshipping God is primarily based on fear, that we worship a vengeful, unforgiving God. And while Jesus' teaching on the end of time may always make us uncomfortable, may always inspire a nervous giggle or the urge to bat it away, they are, in their essence, a ministry to us. For it reminds us to plow on, to hold on faithfully, trusting that in the end, the center will hold. God will deliver us, heal us, free us and birth something new and life-giving amidst the wreckage. Maybe that *is* a message worth memorizing – worth embroidering and hanging on our walls. AMEN.