

PENTECOST 23B/LECTIONARY 33

November 15, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Daniel 12:1-3

Psalm 16

Hebrews 10:11-18

Mark 13:1-8

A few weeks ago in our Lutheran Course 1 we talked about how the Bible is really a collection of books, similar to a library. And like a library, the Bible contains many different kinds of writings: there's history, poetry, psalms and songs, prayers, and prophecy, to name just a few.

Today's Gospel reading is a different sort of literature, called apocalyptic. When we think of apocalyptic literature we typically think of books like Daniel or Revelation. But apocalypse occurs in other parts of the Bible, too. Today's Gospel reading is just a small part of what is commonly called “The Little Apocalypse” of Mark chapter 13.

So what is apocalyptic literature? Apocalyptic writings talk about the end times. They represent the present time as one of suffering. They encourage us to be faithful in the midst of an evil world. They promise rewards for the patient and faithful righteous, and that the unrighteous will eventually suffer.

It seems somehow appropriate that we engage today's Gospel reading in the week following the release of the new movie "2012." It is a movie which, in typical Hollywood blockbuster fashion, presents a view of what the end times will look like. In short, it's apocalypse.

There are several Protestant denominations that make apocalyptic writings the center of their proclamation. It's this sort of theology that has led to books like the *Left Behind* series. But we, as Lutherans, read the Bible as God's message of Good News to us. We tend to shy away from apocalyptic theology, where the intent seems more to drive people to God out of fear of judgment. We believe that God, instead, calls to us out of love, in the person of Jesus Christ.

So how can apocalypse speak to us Lutherans? One Lutheran commentator asks:

How does one preach apocalyptic literature to people who are not suffering? This type of literature was written during periods of great persecution and suffering to encourage the believers to remain faithful throughout the ordeal. Can it speak to our comfortable people today?¹

My friends, I propose to you that if you perceive you are not suffering as a Christian, if you don't think you're being persecuted, if you're feeling comfortable in your Christian faith, this is a matter of *perception*. The *reality* that I see around us today is that this *IS* a time of persecution. If you're not suffering because of your Christian faith, it might be because you've been keeping your faith to yourself.

I'll give you an example. Back in 1999 I had just re-entered college. One day while walking across campus, minding my own business, a woman – a total stranger – walked up to me, angrily pointed at the cross I was wearing around my neck, and said to me, “You shouldn't be wearing that!” She said I shouldn't be wearing a cross because she found it offensive. I admit, I was so flabbergasted I was speechless.

Or how about this? Christmas is approaching, right? Do you say “Merry Christmas!” to total strangers, or do you opt for the more politically-correct “Happy Holidays!”? But hey, not everyone celebrates Christmas, right? Everyone celebrates some sort of holiday around Christmas time, so why not just say “Happy Holidays!”?

Why is it okay for our children to go to school to learn about Kwanzaa, to sing Hanukah songs, or even learn about Ramadan in its proper season, but any mention of a Christian holiday – Christmas – is expressly forbidden?

A couple of years ago I attended the “Holiday Tree Lighting” ceremony on the Army post where we live. Positioned next to the “holiday tree” was a menorah to commemorate the Jewish holiday of Hanukah. But heaven forbid we should call that brightly-decorated evergreen a “Christmas tree”! No, it was a “holiday tree.” And in the interests of being all-inclusive, the post's volunteer choir was reduced to singing a song where the words were meaningless monosyllables. God forbid we should offend anyone. Oh, excuse me – I just said “God.”

And so once again I say – if you're not feeling persecuted for your Christian faith, it is probably either a problem of perception or a lack of profession. There seems to be more than enough persecution of Christian out there nowadays.

And we don't know when or how it will end. The movie “2012” is based on the notion that the end times will begin on December 21, 2012, when the Mayan calendar ends. Despite the fact that this theory has been thoroughly debunked, this is a belief that will persist until December 22, 2012. If you thought millennialism was bad – when the year 2000 came – just wait until December 2012!

But even Jesus himself said he didn't know when the end times would come. At the end of Mark chapter 13 he says, “But about the day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” He concludes by saying, “What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”²

Perhaps to us 21st Century Christians Jesus *ought* to have said, “Wake up!” When we are being told to exalt the faith of others, to the exclusion of our own faith from the public sphere, we are being persecuted. Christian friends, I say, “Wake up!”

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We've spent the past year, from the beginning of Advent until today, traveling through the Gospel of Mark. We end our journey with today's “Little Apocalypse,” which surely doesn't seem like Good News. In today's Gospel reading Jesus speaks of the end times. It is a time of great turmoil and destruction. But from the start, Mark is very clear about his purpose in writing – verse 1, chapter 1 says: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The Good News for us is that, despite whatever persecution we may suffer now for our faith, everything will be all right. Jesus speaks of these end times not only as times of turmoil and destruction, but also as “birth pangs.” Out of birth comes new life. Out of the end times – whenever they come and however they may come – God is still in charge. Everything will be alright. God sent His Son to make sure of that. These are the words of good news for us.

And the good news for us gathered here today is that we have among us several people who have gone through their own “birth pangs” and will today proclaim their re-birth into the Christian faith. We will receive, through their Affirmation of Baptism, nine new members – five at our first service and four at the late service. These people will stand in our midst to profess their belief in the Christian faith.

This is good news for all of us! Good news for us that despite what seems like a concerted attempt to put down the Christian faith, people will still stand up to proclaim, “This is what I believe.” It is especially good news for our newest members, who have come to embrace the embrace of God.

Indeed, everything will be alright. Thanks be to God!

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¹ Brian Stoffregen, *Proper 28B: Mark 13:1-8: Exegetical Notes*, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark13x1.htm>, downloaded 11/14/09.

² Mark 13:32-33, 37