



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 29, 2020
The First Sunday Of Advent

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, and Mark 13:24-37
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Little Apocalypse

I am of an age where my upbringing was awash with apocalyptic movies. Whether it was an earthly threat like a great flood or climate cataclysm, or an unearthly threat like aliens invading or the dead rising from the grave, some blockbuster of this ilk was always being trotted out. Some movies, like *War of the Worlds* or *the Day After Tomorrow*, actually follow the characters as they go through the shock of the calamity, it is a true surprise to have everything fall apart, and we have to watch them figure out how to scramble and survive, until some lull at the end. So many other contemporary tales take place *after* the calamity, a so-called post-apocalyptic movie, like *Max Max*, where the eponymous character must survive a fundamentally destabilized world where the oil has nearly run out. It makes sense that these would be successful so often, at least when you are not in a little apocalypse of your own.

As far as showmanship is concerned, there are few more thrilling settings than an apocalypse to witness a great spectacle on the one hand, where the team can pull out all the stops with their special effects, as well as great dramatic consequence for the characters, where we can cheer them, have our hearts break for them, and in whom we see ourselves.

It's not just about imagining what we would do in such a situation. I'll speak for myself here, these movies always had me asking how I measured up, if I would truly be able to handle such a crisis. Could I be like the protagonists and make it through such turmoil, or would I crumble? I think a big part of every apocalyptic movie's appeal is the ending, when you can turn it off and return to the usual civilization that is still there for you. Sure it introduces a measure of dread, but movie apocalyptic also adds a layer of gratitude for all that you tend to take for granted. How can you complain about school or work, for example, when you think of all these miserable alternatives?

At the start of our reading from the prophet Isaiah, we read in him what apparently is a longing for apocalypse. "Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens," the prophet cries to God, "Oh that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence, As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence!" Now, I can't think of a case in my upbringing where I hoped for the particular apocalypse to happen. And yet, here we see that hope, indeed a representation of a long-cherished prophetic hope for the "Day of the Lord," the final day of this Age. A terrible day, from one perspective, but most importantly the Day when God promises to return and set things right, destroying evil or the forces of evil completely.

This is the great difference between contemporary and biblical apocalyptic. The contemporary mode is from the perspective of the empire and its satisfied denizens, and the experience is horror at some great fall. Yet the biblical mode is vividly from the perspective of those who are occupied by an empire, enslaved and abused by abominable forces. If you are a slave or a prisoner, or even just impoverished, apocalypse is indeed a viable option, a release at the very least, perhaps even a time for vindication. Not for the people of Hollywood but for the people of the Holy Rood, in our heritage, apocalypse is indeed a kind of good news, where endemic evil, standardized dysfunction, is ultimately defeated. It is written about like a great liberating battle, with heroes and villains, sometimes great and horrible people in the lead, sometimes angels and demons, with a fair amount of resistance and devastation.

The notorious battlefield, a frequent choice for confrontation, Megiddo, was sometimes invoked in these visions of the Day of the Lord, hence the word “Armageddon.” But other places are invoked as the particular location of this final resolution. Jerusalem you might expect, but you might not know that the setting for today’s Gospel reading, the Mount of Olives, is prominent in the biblical vision, specifically in the prophet Zechariah’s account of the Day of the Lord.

As he writes in his fourteenth chapter, “Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee, for I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle... and the city shall be taken...then shall the Lord go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.”

For Jesus and his disciples, any time spent, or anything done on that Mount of Olives, whether it be his weeping over Jerusalem, the raising of Lazarus in Bethany (on that Mount), the origin point of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, or the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (on that Mount, as well), all of these moments are colored by apocalyptic significance. How fitting that Jesus’ Olivet Discourse, a portion of which we read today, given to a few of his disciples from the Mount of Olives, is also known as “the Little Apocalypse,” a short, but thorough survey of the ultimate trouble and consolation to come.

This discourse was triggered by an unnamed disciple marveling at the glory of the temple, perhaps thinking that it would be theirs someday. And Jesus responds by insisting that the Temple was not long for this world. It wouldn’t have required supernatural insight to know this, given how much tension there was between occupier and the occupied. Jesus then paints a vivid, brisk picture on the Mount of Olives with a few disciples of how all things will be fulfilled, how wars and rumors of wars will ensue, false prophets and false Christs, kangaroo courts, betrayal, familial hatred, and more affliction than history has ever seen.

But there is a second section to his Little Apocalypse, set after all that tribulation is through, a kind of post-apocalyptic setting, but no less grand, when the heavens collapse upon the earth, the angels gather up all the chosen, and the Son of Man returns from the clouds in great glory. all this at a time that not even he knows, somehow so obscure that only the Father in Heaven knows.

It is notably with this vision of last things that we begin our Christian Year on this First Sunday of Advent. We start with this, being sure to emphasize that there is a goal to our journey, whether it is for this year, or for our entire lives, no matter the tribulation of our time there is something to look forward to, an end point to hope for when God will come fully revealed, living among us forever, healing the nations, and keeping his promises.

Jesus’ Little Apocalypse is all quite dramatic, and part of a long tradition. There are so many important details to consider, but the heart of the vision for me is this line: “Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away.”

Jesus wanted to shake and stir us, to point to a disturbing horizon, one, in his case, where the Temple could fall, the Holy City could fall, even the stars themselves.

But beyond all that that collapse, there is a solid core to their life together, these cords of love and truth, that God will not let pass away, no matter if the stars fall. He speaks about the Day of the Lord, a day of Fear and Trembling, not to scare us into a fetal position, but to equip us for anything, and to assure them that they are inheritors of Imperishable Light that shines beyond any dreadful horizon.

He speaks of a Great Fall in order to show us the Glory of what will stand firm! He tells us today to “Watch ye, therefore.” “Take heed, watch and pray.”

This is our mystical task this season of Advent, even in the midst of turmoil, even with the promise of more to come, to steel ourselves with a faithful resolve keep our watchful eyes open.

First, today, we look for the Imperishable Light to come, revealed to all from the clouds. Then, as the season continues, more and more we will ceremonially wait for the first inbreaking of that Glorious Light out of a manger in Bethlehem, a light that has made us who we are, delivered us from the dark, and bound us together.

In this season, in God’s transcendent time, we somehow anticipate a light that has already come. And out of that timeless eternity, somehow His First Coming behind us becomes our beacon leading us to His Second Coming ahead when “Heaven and earth shall pass away: but His words shall not.”

This our New Year’s Day, the one when we to watch for that imperishable light anew, when we listen for those imperishable words anew, so that the fullness of what walked this earth long ago, and the fullness of what is to come, may reveal the fullness of the One who is with us, hidden, and close, even now.