

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
First Sunday in Advent – December 3, 2017/Year B
The Reverend Elizabeth Masterson

In 1979 a film by Francis Ford Coppola called “Apocalypse Now” told a story about the search for a rogue military officer, set during the Vietnam War. My reflections today have nothing to do with the content of this story. Rather I want to use the title of the movie, “Apocalypse NOW,” to offer a way to delve into the meaning of the epistle and gospel readings today.

“Apocalypse” has been used to talk about the complete final destruction of the world as in an scenario where one or more nations send intercontinental ballistic missiles tipped nuclear warheads to blow up their enemies. Yet when we look at “apocalypse” from its history as a word, the meaning shifts a bit. It came into English from Greek roots that meant, “uncover” or “reveal.”¹

So, if we can for a moment put aside the destructive, end-of-the world scenario, we can focus on what the passage we have hear from Mark—sometimes called the “little apocalypse”—might be teaching us.

God's revelation of God's yearning for humankind and God's love for us can be seen again and again through the Biblical accounts of the lives of

¹ Greek *apokalupsis*, from *apokaluptein* ‘uncover, reveal,’ from *apo-* ‘un-’ + *kaluptein* ‘to cover.’

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Leah and Rachel. The prophets—Elijah, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, and many others—spoke about God’s purposes in the historical situations where they tried to reveal God’s will to usually stubborn and unreceptive listeners.

We can say that Jesus’ teaching and his life, death and resurrection are yet another a revelation of who God is and what God desires for us. So the possibility of Jesus Christ’s return or second coming became an important issue for the early church. This could be called “Apocalypse SOON”—God’s final uncovering of God’s nature in the reign of Christ over the earth and the cosmos.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians saying, the “grace of God [that] has been given” to them “in Christ Jesus.” Because of this they will not be “lacking in any spiritual gift” as they “wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul assures them that Christ “will strengthen you to the end, so you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Gospel of Mark, in the passage we heard, notes that Jesus seemed to talk about an “Apocalypse SOON.” Mark reports that Jesus said: “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give

its, light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

What do these words make you feel? Most people end up in one of three places when they consider Jesus' words: Scared or worried about the end of time OR eager to see what will happen, especially if a person believes themselves to be one of “the elect” OR detached—because believing that Jesus showed us the best way to live. This does not mean having to believe in the ancient cosmology of these apocalyptic words.

All three of these points of view exist in our culture, and all three may exist within each of us from time to time. In fact, “Apocalypse SOON” may be more accurately described today as “Apocalypse SOMETIME.” For the very next statement Mark reports Jesus as saying, “But about that 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.”

How does this uncertainty affect us? A long while ago my then five-year old son heard a popular song which concluded with God’s decision to “start all over again.” He took it to heart as telling the truth about the end of the world. I’m certain that my son’s anxiety about the end of the world was based on his concern for the world he knew. He heard the song as an explanation about something that really could destroy all the people he loved and his own security.

So should we look at the future as “Apocalypse SOMETIME?” Or might it be: apocalypse in God’s time? Humankind may worry about the end of time; or we may look forward to God’s reign; or we may try to take matters into our own hands by creating the end of time with chaos and bloodshed through acts of war or terror. Nevertheless, we do not, should not, and cannot know how and when the creation in the end will be fully redeemed from the evil which now infects it.

Yet we do know and can depend on the message of hope these passages bring. Hope? What do I mean by hope? We can discern the hope that comes from depending on God, from trusting in God’s grace when we read such words as these:

- “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait”—faith, hope and love are the gifts that will abide with us.
- “My words will not pass away”—Jesus summarized how we should live: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.
- “It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and put his slaves in charge, each with his work”—God has entrusted us with the care of creation and of each other, each of us with his or her particular work to do. Our vocation may be what we are paid to do; or it may be what we love to do outside our regular jobs; or how we spend our time in our retirement. Always, we must try to discern what God yearns us, so our deeds will honor God.
- “Keep awake”—Know that God loves us and wants a relationship with us, no matter how difficult or painful our circumstances may become—even if the balance of power in nuclear arms called “Mutually Assured Destruction” comes undone. And I pray constantly that it will not!

I believe that “apocalypse in God’s time” will mean this: “from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” wherever we are, we will finally see God’s glory

uncovered and share in that joy!