



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Apocalypse? Not so much.

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, November 18, 2012

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Mark 13:1-8

If you're thinking these verses we just heard from Mark's Gospel have an apocalyptic tone, you're right. Great buildings will tumble down, wars and rumors of wars, nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom, earthquakes, famines. Wait—is this Mark, or is this last night's news, or this morning's *New York Times*?

This isn't the easiest gospel passage to hear. We might wonder, perhaps a tad crankily or wistfully, what happened to those nice stories about Jesus: the mustard seed, the lost sheep, the widow and her coins?

When you begin to hear gospels like this, let it be a sign unto you: Advent is coming.

Hard to believe, but Sunday after next, December 2nd, is the first Sunday of Advent, the new year of the Church. Every Advent, we start reading a different Gospel and we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest that Gospel over the next year. This year we've been reading through the Gospel of Mark. On December 2nd, we'll start reading through the Gospel of Luke. The year after that, we'll read Matthew.

This three-year cycle of reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, with bits of John sprinkled in like spice every year—plus another scripture reading every Sunday—is to my mind one of the genius points of our church. If you come to church even semi-regularly, then in three years you hear a large part of the entire Bible. Now back to Mark.

So we're approaching the end of our church year; we're also approaching the end of the Gospel of Mark. In these last chapters of Mark, Jesus enters Jerusalem as an acclaimed teacher and healer; he has a series of escalating conflicts with the religious leaders, conflicts direct enough to make those religious leaders want to kill him, which they eventually do. This 13th chapter of Mark sits between these accounts of growing conflict and Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. So yes, this particular chapter of Mark is rather dark and apocalyptic sounding.

"Apocalypse", as you know, means the end of the world, or some event that causes damage or destruction on a catastrophic scale.

Can any of us hear that definition today and not think of the storm we've all just lived through? Can we hear these words and not see in our minds the horrible scenes of destruction and devastation on Staten Island, on Breezy Point, in the Rockaways, on the Jersey shore—or what's left of it?

Anyone who watched the ocean rising into their home during Storm Sandy, or felt their house shudder (or worse), or who lost all their possessions, or who lost their home, or who lost someone dear to them—that person knows devastation. Surely, during that awful night, that person wondered if the end had come.

Many of us at some time in our lives have felt that the end has come or have wondered if the end is near. We've wondered if we're seeing and experiencing signs that the end of the world as we know it is coming.

Given what's happening right around us and around the world right now, it's hard not to at least consider that question. Storm Sandy and its aftermath. Our national election probably feels like the end of the world to some. The fiscal cliff. Petraeus. Benghazi. Syria. Israel and Gaza, with already another attack this morning. Greece.

In case you haven't heard, the latest prediction of the official end of the world, from some Mayan calendar, is all over the internet right now. Here's the date to mark on your calendars: The end of the world will be December 21, 2012 ... about a month away. If you believe this, does that mean you make sure to finish your Christmas shopping early? Or does it make Christmas shopping a moot point?

Many of us may have known the end of the world in a personal way. "You have cancer." "I want a divorce." "Your job has been eliminated." "There has been a terrible accident." If you hear any of these things, you wonder: Were there signs that this was coming? How did I not see them? Or why did I choose not to see them?

It's natural to look for signs ahead (and signs in hindsight). We want to guard as best we can against disasters, to keep them from happening if we can. We want to avoid them if at all possible. We want to protect ourselves from them.

That's what's happening in our Gospel today. That's what Peter, James, John and Andrew are trying to find out from Jesus: when will the end be? And what are the signs that it's about to happen? What can we do, what should we do to prepare for this?

What do you do when you believe the end is near? If you find yourself in the middle of the storm, your little boat blown about and flooded, you think this really is it—then you may pray, even if you've never prayed before in your life. You may resolve to live differently, if you live through this at all. If I ever see my wife/husband/children again, I'm going to _____.

If the end isn't quite here yet and you have some time, what do you do? You board up your windows. You stock up on water and batteries and non-perishable food. You evacuate. Surely everyone who can is scrambling now to put the brakes

on Israel and Gaza, to bring this back from the cliff they're about to go over. Surely everyone who can is scrambling to keep our own country from going over the fiscal cliff. Surely . . .

Here's the surprise: For all its apocalyptic sound, this gospel passage is not about the end. The disciples think it's about the end; they ask Jesus about it. But Mark's Jesus refuses to talk about the end, he doesn't talk about signs, he doesn't give any timeline. He doesn't go there.

Instead, Mark's Jesus urges the community to Beware (the Greek is *be aware!* meaning, *pay attention!*). Don't be deceived by false claims that the end is near. Be discerning—discern both the challenges and the opportunities in this crisis. Endure, hold your ground, hold your position in spite of pressures to move away from that position. In other words, hold firm (note: firm, not rigid). Keep the faith.

Those are words Mark's own community desperately needed to hear. They were living through Roman occupation and persecution. These words were written during the Jewish revolt against the Romans, just before the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, when wars and rumors of wars were a daily reality. There had just been several significant earthquakes, as well as a terrible famine, which is described in horrific detail by the historian Josephus. Mark's community needed to hear these words encouraging them to be faithful and patient and steadfast amidst their trials and adversity and suffering.

We need to hear these words, too. Trials and adversity and suffering, both human-made and natural disasters, will always happen. They always have and they always will. Each of us will have to live through apocalypse of one kind or another; it's part of being human. We need to hear these words, too: Be aware, pay attention! Don't be deceived by false claims that the end is near. Be discerning—discern both the challenges and the opportunities. Endure. Hold your ground. Hold your position in spite of pressures to move away from that position. Keep the faith.

In order to keep the faith, you have to have *hope*. You have to trust that God is present and acting in life-giving ways, even in the worst times. God is creating, redeeming and sustaining—present tense. (Because the present is all we have, really.) But what if you can't, just can't, do that? You find yourself in a storm of some sort, and you can't find any faith to keep, and hope is totally off your the radar screen. What then?

Eleven years ago, during my second term in seminary, I had my own dark time of floundering in terror. You'd think someone training to be a priest and living in the middle of a seminary would have faith and hope in her hip pocket. But no. Friends and family from all over the country, including clergy and friends here at St. Bart's, including the very new seminary community I'd just entered 3,000 miles from home—these people reached out to me. They lent me their faith and hope until I could regain my own.

Having faith and hope isn't about doing it by yourself. It's about being part of a community of faith, not just for self-preservation, but so that we draw strength and faith and hope from each other and share it with whoever needs it, whether they are in the community or not. Identifying who's in our community and who's out becomes irrelevant as our understanding of community grows.

Yesterday your St. Bart's clergy and several delegates from our congregation attended the Episcopal Diocese of New York's annual convention. One of the things we did there was to honor our Bishop, Mark Sisk, who is retiring, for his steady and compassionate leadership of this diocese through these past ten years: through September 11 (almost his first day in office); the Cathedral fire (which took years to restore); the election of Bishop Gene Robinson in 2003 and the resulting firestorms that swept through our own Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion (and are still out there on the edges, smoldering away); the Great Recession of 2008 (which is still with us), last year's Hurricane Irene, and now Storm Sandy. Bishop Sisk has led this diocese through these trying times with wisdom and faith and even kept his sense of humor. Here is what keeping the faith (and sharing the faith) during adversity looks like.

Our newly elected Bishop Coadjutor, Andy Dietsche, spoke eloquently at yesterday's convention, taking issue with reports that "the church is dying" and—as I heard and interpret it—urging us to claim the *hope* that is our birthright as Christians, to live as people of hope, and to live God's hope into the world. Bishop Dietsche didn't just talk the talk; he offered specific practical ways for us to do this as a Diocese. Here is what keeping the faith (and sharing the faith) looks like.

I bet you can think of other people who have modeled for you what keeping the faith and sharing the faith during adversity looks like.

At the very heart of our Christian faith, starting not with Jesus, but from the beginning of creation itself, is God's promise that out of every death, God will bring new life. Birthpangs are the beginning of new life.

Today's Gospel reminds us of God's promise and urges us to believe it. Believe, meaning not something I keep in my head but believing as *credo*, meaning, "I give my heart to."

Keep giving your heart to God's promise. And if you can't do that, find a community who will lend you its heart until you can get yours back.

Find a way to help bring new life from devastation.

Find a way to *be* part of the new life God is birthing in every adversity.

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