

Since the dawn of time human beings have best expressed joy and sorrow, triumph and struggle, through music. The psalms, half of which are laments, are songs; we've just lost the original tunes over time. Our psalmody today was Hannah's song from 1 Samuel, which is a celebration, but a celebration of God finally righting the wrongs in Hannah's world; her song is the template for Mary's magnificat, which we'll revisit soon in Advent. Mary also sings of God restoring justice in our broken world. Those songs were written hundreds of years apart and thousands of years ago, but music that narrates humanity's struggle is not a lost genre. Anyone about my age or younger probably had a history teacher who would give you extra credit for defining all the lyrics in Billy Joel's *We Didn't Start the Fire*. The song is just a list of mid-20th century names and events, punctuated by the chorus: *We didn't start the fire; it was always burning since the world's been turning...we didn't light it but we tried to fight it...* and ending with *When we are gone it will still burn on and on and on...yeah*, it's a little fatalistic, but the tune is catchy and the MTV music video was cool. Around the same time, REM sang about a less specific list of social trends and historical cycles: *It's The End of the World As We Know It*. Someone joked this week that they don't feel nearly as fine as REM led them to believe they would. But don't be fooled by Michael Stipe singing about losing his religion; although those songs would be labeled "secular" music, these artists were spiritually fluent and understood the end times theme in today's appointed scripture.

Last week in Mark's gospel Jesus criticized Israel for corrupting God's Law, such that the very poorest members of society—like the widow with her two coins—thought their religious duty was to give every last thing they had to support the lavish lifestyle of the rich, idle religious leaders, when in fact the religious leaders should have known that *their* duty was to care for the most vulnerable. Never missing a chance to miss the point, the disciples hear Jesus' rebuke and immediately turn around and fawn all over the big expensive temple: *Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings it has!* And they are correct: the temple was so large and expensive that its construction required leveling forests, doing business with unprincipled nations, and forcing hundreds of thousands of people into slave labor. It had been partially destroyed and rebuilt; it had been desecrated and rededicated; and in the generation before Jesus, it had been expanded not so much to honor the Lord as to give bragging rights to Herod the Great. The temple, and the society built around it, were too big to fail. Yet Jesus says, *Not one stone will be left here upon another.*

This prediction and Jesus' warning about impending natural and political disasters is what we refer to as apocalyptic literature, and it was nothing new. *Apocalypse* doesn't mean *the end of the world*, it means *to reveal something that is hidden*: hence, the book of *Revelation*. Apocalyptic authors wrote protest literature against the regimes that oppressed them, but they hid their critique in stories set in other time periods to avoid political retribution. The bible tells us that Daniel's den of lions and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's fiery furnace belong to Nebuchadnezzar during the Babylonian exile, but the book of Daniel was written much later to give people hope during Antiochus Epiphanes' reign of terror. Revelation, with its heavenly visions and mythical beasts, sounds like it's predicting a strange and scary

future, but it was written to encourage the early church as they suffered the Roman Empire's persecution. The reason people of faith read these passages and think they must apply to their own time and place is because they do—but only in the sense that human history is stuck on repeat. Jesus says *you will hear of wars and rumors of wars*...well, yeah, when has there *not* been war going on somewhere in this world?

The other thing we need to know about Jesus predicting the demise of the temple was that by the time the gospels were written, it had already happened. The gospel writers didn't follow Jesus around with notebooks, recording everything he said and did; they wrote after his life and death. So the first twelve disciples might have been unable to imagine the total destruction of the temple, the center of Israel's universe, a structure so big it had to seem permanent. But by the time the gospel stories were first shared in the early church, the people *knew* that the temple *could* be destroyed, because the Romans had already destroyed it, along with up to a million Jews who died in the Great Revolt. These passages are not meant to scare us about the future but to give us hope in the present: to encourage us after disaster strikes, as we are living through it, and when it continues to happen.

Because humans tend to be a little self-centered, every generation has been convinced that the world has never been worse, and that things are finally so bad they must be living into the end times. And in a way, they've all been right. The song doesn't say, *It's the end of the world*, but *it's the end of the world 'as we know it'*...and it always seems like the world *as we know it* it is ending, because it is. But the message isn't that because these things always happen, things aren't that bad, because sometimes they are that bad. Neither is the message that things are bad, but we'll all get through it. That simply isn't true. Four years ago, we were calling off in-person worship again because of spiking covid numbers; *we* who are here this morning made it through that, but over a million people didn't. It's a false hope that says things aren't that bad when they are or that no matter how bad things are, we'll get through them, when we might not. So if things are every bit as bad as we think they are, and some of us will end up as casualties or at least collateral damage from what is going on in our world, what is the good news of this gospel?

The good news is that in the long, long time we wait as the arc of the moral universe bends ever so slightly toward justice, God, who is faithful and just, is still with us. We don't have to look for someone to come save us, because God is already here, in the midst of even the most desperate circumstances. Jesus says many will come in his name and say, 'I am he!' and lead people astray. And that is certainly true: there will always be people who try to exploit the fear that results from our world's chaos—or who create the chaos so they can sell themselves as the only one who can save us from it. But we know who Jesus is: the humble, patient, merciful, selfless servant who changed the world by love. Anyone who insists on a different path or who tells us that these calamitous times require us to abandon the ethics of care and compassion is not speaking in Jesus' name. And so, whether we're living through a time of relative peace, or we're hearing of wars and rumors of wars, and nations are rising against nations, and the earth is shaking and the seas are rising...our job is still the same: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. May God, who faithfully promises to be with us, give us the strength to hold fast to our hope without wavering, so that we can encourage one another, and all the more in these trying times.