

There are several reasons why I'm Lutheran, but one of them is that I do appreciate that, on the whole, we seem to focus much less than some other denominations on end times predictions and interpreting world events as signs that God is about to bring this phase of the human experiment in which we are living to a close. After all, Jesus doesn't speak nearly as much about the end of the world as he does about the ongoing transformation of this world into a better expression of God's kingdom through service, mercy, justice, and love. But here at the end of the liturgical year—just one more week to go—we always read a couple apocalyptic passages in the Sunday lectionary.

The word *apocalypse* has been somewhat coopted in pop culture so that now when people use it they are usually referring to the end of the world as we know it. But the word really means the unveiling of something that is hidden. Apocalyptic literature, in the bible and elsewhere, developed as a way to talk about current events covertly, in order to protect the authors who critiqued society from the retribution of those governing that society. Apocalyptic writers promised that God would eventually rescue and vindicate the oppressed, but they did it without tipping off the oppressors. The book of Daniel, from which our Old Testament reading for today is taken, is a good example: the action is set during the Babylonian exile, but it was written centuries later, when Greek rulers were persecuting their Jewish subjects. When these books are read literally, it often appears as though their prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. But by their very definition, these books are written to be read figuratively. Yet, typical of the self-centeredness of human nature, at least a few members of nearly every generation have looked at the world around them and convinced themselves, and sometimes others, that no period of history ever has been or ever could be worse, so this must be the end of it all.

Of course, history was about to hit an all-time low when Jesus leads his disciples out of the Temple, just one chapter before he is arrested. The disciples are a little star-struck by the sheer size and grandeur of the Temple: *Teacher! What big buildings it has!...All the better to distract you, my dears*, Jesus replies. The disciples have spent three years in the daily presence of God, who has been teaching them what it means to walk in God's ways; yet the Temple, the house of God, seems to have made more of an impression on them than the Son of God. So as he often does, Jesus redirects their attention with a little reality check: *Not one stone will be left upon another; it all will be thrown down*. Still the disciples miss the point, fixated as they are on the building and now the destruction of the building—especially *when* they can expect that

to happen. Whatever they think the destruction of the Temple means, Jesus again redirects them: *Don't be led astray. All of these things will happen, but it is still only the beginning.*

Jesus' prediction of the Temple's destruction was spot-on; in response to the Jewish revolt, Rome did level all those large stones and buildings, about 40 years after Jesus and his disciples walked its grounds. In fact, Mark wrote his gospel just a few years before the revolt culminated in Rome's destruction of the Temple, so members of his community may have seen Jesus' words come true within their lifetime. But Jesus is very clear that even the destruction of the Temple—which would have symbolized to the people that God no longer dwelt with them—even when that happens, even when the worst thing they can imagine happening happens, that's still not cause for hopelessness or despair. Rumors of wars are going to circulate. Wars are going to happen. Earthquakes, famines, and dare I say pandemics are going to happen. *This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.*

I don't know if my pain tolerance is high, low, or average, and I have zero experience of labor and delivery, so I can't speak too personally to Jesus' use of that metaphor here. But his point seems to be that what may very well feel like the end can be, in reality, a new beginning. We human beings are exceptionally skilled at making huge messes in the world in which we live. Yes, some disasters are beyond our control or responsibility: those earthquakes, for example. But we have to blame ourselves, not God, for wars, for destroying the climate in ways that lead to some not-so-natural disasters, for apathy and negligence in the face of various crises, for creating and maintaining unjust systems that cause the most vulnerable to live lives that are always one step away from disaster. When God created the world, it was good; when we got a hold of it, we made it not-so-good; but God is in the business of redemption, which means there's hope for us yet.

Jesus instructs the disciples to stay the course, no matter what the signs of the times might be. Loving one another, serving one another, forgiving, helping, and caring for one another will always be what God calls us to do, no matter how scary the world around us gets. Those are the ways that, bit by bit, we participate in God's kingdom lighting up the places in this world over which catastrophe and suffering have cast a shadow. So even in the midst of the disasters of this world, we get to glimpse the new thing God is doing—the beginning that comes after what surely looks like the end. Thanks be to God.