

Rev. 12:1-6

Psalm 25 Sung: R: To You O God, I lift up, I lift up my soul, my God.

2Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 13:14-27, 30-37

Hope in the Chaos
November 30, 2008 1st Sunday in Advent *hope*

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The readings from Revelations and Mark 13, involve what is known as “apocalyptic literature”. To our contemporary ears, the images of apocalyptic literature sound bizarre and frightening. Either we assume the writer meant them literally and we take them literally; or we wonder what possible meaning and relevance these symbols and images could have for us.

Part of the difficulty we have finding meaning in apocalyptic images comes from our different context. Apocalyptic literature is crisis literature. It grew out of cultural collapse and the resulting disorder and chaos. For the author of Mark’s gospel, the crisis was the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. For the author of Revelation, it was the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Diocletian about 90-100 CE. Although our culture teeters on the brink of cultural collapse, and its companions, - war, violence, famine and natural disasters - surround us, we in the U.S. have yet to confront the cumulative horror cultural collapse brings. We do not *yet* feel the degree of desperation that Judeans of the 1st century faced.

The purpose of apocalyptic literature is one we *can* understand. Apocalyptic literature seeks to build hope in the face of hopelessness. The author of Mark tries to explain the destruction of the Temple, to answer the question how God could permit this to happen. In the face of a seemingly fatal blow to Judean and early Christian faith, the author struggles to find meaning and purpose in the devastating loss. If the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem can be given meaning, the loss can be survived. If there is meaning in this seemingly total loss, there is hope.

So the author writes of Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the Temple, assuring listeners that Jesus foresaw this tragedy as Jeremiah foresaw the destruction of the first Temple almost 600 years before. The author uses stereotypical apocalyptic language to capture the horror of the historical events. The reference to the “desolating sacrilege” refers to the Roman destruction of sacred objects in the Temple and the elevation of Roman gods in the Temple. The generalities described in the images mirror the experience of the listeners, authenticating the author’s message, preparing the listeners for the author’s vision of *hope*.

The vision of hope is of the *Human One*, coming on a *cloud in glory*. The “Human One” is the title which God gave Ezekiel, the title Jesus preferred for himself. For this writer, the Human One is Jesus. The cloud is a classic Biblical image for the presence of God to God’s people. “Glory”, streaming light, is a classic Biblical image of God’s stunning and real manifestation in human experience and worship. The three images together convey a theological concept: When the Temple was destroyed, God became homeless. Metaphorically, God was forced to seek a new dwelling. God found a new dwelling in Jesus, the Human One.

For the author of this gospel, the cloud and the glory moved from the Temple to the corporate humanity of Jesus. There was hope. Despite God’s apparent abandonment of the Judean people, God could be accessed through Jesus. There was hope beyond horror, new life beyond death, meaning in the devastation of Judean life and culture, meaning in the destruction of the Temple. When the Temple was destroyed, God was no longer confined to Judean experience and faith, no longer confined to Jerusalem. God became available to all people in all places.

It’s important to understand that when the author developed this theological explanation of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, the Jesus followers were still largely practicing Jews. The author assumed, and simultaneously argued, that Jesus was Messiah. The implications of the transfer of God’s presence from the Temple to the Messiah was good news to all Judeans. But the implications changed radically just 20 short years later when Judean faith and Jesus faith parted company. What was healing and hope-full when written, became a theological explanation for the supplanting of Judaism by Christianity, a theological basis for anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

We know, because of the history between ourselves and this ancient writer, that God does not dwell in Jesus for everyone. We know that for the descendants of most Judeans, for the Jews, God is present in the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures and the community of believers, not in Jesus. We recognize this and accept this as part of the wonder and beauty of divine expression. We are able to recognize and accept this because we are no longer trapped in the historical, philosophical and theological worldview of the writer.

Hope is contextual. We seek it where we find it. There is a sense in which seeking hope is seeking God. When hope is dead, God is dead. Where hope lives, God lives. And so, we Christians set aside this season of Advent to “tend” the delicate plant of hope, to nurture and cultivate its life among us. We do not seek to create false hope [the evangelist warns against that]. Rather, we seek to reach deep down within ourselves, individually and collectively, to find the slender shoot of hope within and tend its growth. Although the images of this discourse of Jesus need explanation, and although we interpret the implications of the author’s theology and vision differently, we who *are* in relation to God through Jesus, rejoice in the vision that God is present among us and to us through Jesus, the Human One. And in that vision and experience, we derive hope in our time.