



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

15. November, 2009. Pentecost 24

Title: "Apocalypse Now"

Text: St. Mark 13:1-8

J.J.



"Apocalypse Now" was a famous, or infamous (depending upon your perspective), movie from the last millennium, starring Marlon Brando (now I'm dating myself). It's setting was Viet Nam, which opened the eyes of many of us to what had actually happened there, which made the movie a little controversial. The plot revolved around two army officers who are sent into the jungle to assassinate the other. Lying bloody and dying on the ground, Brando whispers "The horror . . . the horror of it all." "Apocalypse Now!" Ever so often, it seems, we have these apocalyptic attractions: As we approached the year 2000, there were dire warnings about Y2K catastrophes. Remember? And the spending of billions of dollars to divert them. And then there's "2012," the global doomsday event predicted for December 21, 2012, which just opened last Friday in a theater near you. Friends took me out to see it on its opening night because it was Friday the 13th. "Apocalypse Now!" Indeed!

Now, the disciples, in today's Gospel, find themselves in that kind of situation. I don't imagine that they, especially Peter, James, John and Andrew—those Galilean fisher people, I don't imagine that they had visited Jerusalem all that often. Oh, they probably went there for their *bar mitzvah*, but Jerusalem was a long way from Capernaum, and you didn't make that journey often. And Herod's temple? Well, it was spectacular. They didn't have anything like that back home in Galilee. Oh, they had their synagogue, but what was that compared to the temple. "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings! Isn't this great!" But Jesus knocks their socks off: "You see these great buildings? . . . well, the time is coming when not one stone will be left here upon another" . . . "Apocalypse Now."

This Sunday's Gospel reading deserves our close attention, and we ourselves must be very careful with it. It's written in a literary form we call "apocalyptic," a very special form that has a very special purpose. It's a form with which we are familiar. The entire Book of Revelation is written in this literary form (in fact, the very word "revelation" in the Greek language is "Apocalypse"). And then there's the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Scripture, which could have been our first reading for today. Listen to what Daniel has to say, and you'll better understand the nature of apocalyptic literature: "*The Lord spoke to Daniel in a vision and said, 'At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.'*" (By the way, we chose the alternative reading for this Sunday, I Samuel, because of the incredible response, the Song of Hannah, which the choir wanted to sing). And, even today's Epistle from Hebrews has that apocalyptic flavor as it encourages us to support one another as we see "The Day approaching." Apocalyptic writings have a very special purpose and meaning, and that's why we need to be very careful with it, because we can easily misinterpreted their meaning and purpose. By definition, apocalypse is "an unveiling or an unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from that unveiling." It's not prophecy, that is, it does not predict the future. The prophets always call one to repentance and righteousness if the nation is going to escape judgment. The message of apocalypse, of revelation, however, is always that of patience and trust in God for the deliverance that God promises to provide. Here endeth the theological lecture!

But this is precisely where so many go wrong with this apocalyptic literary form. People want to know the time and the hour, e.g., when Jesus will return, or when will this or that happen. That's a problem many of us have. Like the disciples, we want to know precisely what's going to on . . . we want to know the future . . . we want the inside scoop about what's going to come to pass. "Tell us, Lord, when will this be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished." But notice how Jesus responds. Jesus just sort

of “flips the script” on them and tells them—and us: “Beware that no one leads you astray . . . you’re going to hear of wars and rumors of wars . . . nation rising up against nation . . . and kingdom against kingdom . . . earthquakes . . . and famine . . . All of these things, however, are but the beginning of the birth pangs.”

The challenge for most of us is that we want “certainty now,” not “apocalypse.” We want to know! And we don’t like—at least I don’t like—we don’t like uncertainty. That’s why today’s Gospel reading is so important for us to hear, especially for us here at St. James’. We are living in a time of great uncertainty . . . we are living in and through “Apocalypse Now” . . . And many of us are experiencing that first hand: employment one day, and suddenly unemployment the next; regular income this week and suddenly a cut in income or no income next week; mortgage payment made last month, and suddenly the threats of foreclosure staring us in the face next month; a well managed budget now and suddenly a budget gone to hell in a hand basket; healthy today and all of a sudden sickness or surgery the next day, or the threat of the H1N1 virus with no vaccine available; life, as we know it and live it, and then suddenly the threat of death facing us in the face. These are the times in which we live—“Apocalypse Now.” “Lord, tell us, what’s happening . . . just what’s going on . . . Lord, tell us”

And then there’s our Parish, and this interim time, and the uncertainty of it all as our Vestry struggles to maintain a balanced budget, and tries to figure out how to continue the ministries we all desire and want, and the services to which we have become accustomed . . . as they discuss how St. James’ is to prepare itself as we call our new Rector . . . how do we maintain what we have with the prospect of being able to afford only one full time priest . . . how do we carry out our vision and our ministry? Well, the times they are ah changing. Indeed. “Lord, tell us, what’s happening . . . just what’s going on . . . Lord, tell us.”

And Jesus does just that: “Beware,” Jesus tells us, “Beware, that no one leads you astray . . . indeed, many will come to you in my name and say, I am he! And they will lead you astray. But, know, *I am he*, and I make myself known to you in the breaking of the bread and in prayer. So, do not be afraid! I am with you.” Remember that today, as once again we hear the invitation: “Let us pray . . .” Remember that today, as you hear the words: “The Body of Christ—the Bread of Heaven; The Blood of Christ—the Cup of Salvation” . . . And, remember that tomorrow, as you live out your life in these uncertain times. Be patience and trust God’s deliverance that is sure to come. That’s the message of “Apocalypse Now.” Amen.

S.D.G.

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