

Proper 28B06

At the age of 25 I was living in New York City and had just been promoted to Account Executive as part of a team managing a \$60 million advertising account for the agency that employed me. I had a window office on the 12th floor looking down on Madison Avenue. I had a wonderful apartment in the Gramercy Park neighborhood of Manhattan, I had friends, and enough disposable income to enjoy living in New York. Then, on a hot summer day in July of 1988 I went to a doctor's appointment at which my surgeon informed me that a tumor which he had removed from my left leg the week before was a malignant bone cancer. Within two months I had gone on long-term disability, moved out of my apartment and back to California to live with my family. I had started a series of weekly and bi-weekly chemotherapy treatments that lasted for more than a year. And I began to prepare for what would eventually be a 14 hour surgery to remove 50% of my tibia that contained the tumor, knowing that I might wake up with an amputation, depending on what the doctor found when he went in.

It doesn't take the end of the world for us to feel like the world is coming to an end.

We each experience our own little apocalypses in this life. Our own personal losses or disasters that cause us to wonder whether the world is coming to an end. And the question becomes, how do I handle this challenge or the loss that comes with it? How do I handle the feeling of devastation? How do I face the little apocalypses in my life? Do I let them defeat me? Or, do I take them as opportunities to remind myself of some spiritual truth that perhaps I've forgotten about and to which I can turn for solace and courage?

Jesus did this all the time to wake up his disciples and remind them of their spiritual truths. He often said things to startle them into a new awareness of the world. In this morning's reading from the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus tells his disciples about the end of the world, saying, *"in those days there will be suffering such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be."* As you would expect, the disciples became pretty anxious and asked, "When - when will this happen - how will we know when it's about to happen?" And, like so many other times, Jesus didn't give them an answer, but instead made reference to vague signs and wonders that they could look for to warn them of this impending time of trial. Which, naturally, led to speculation on the part of both the disciples and eventually us about just what Jesus meant and to what time he was referring. And how on earth is this supposed to be helpful anyway?

Unfortunately, what the disciples discovered and what we have confirmed over the centuries is that trying to make apocalyptic texts relevant for today by reading them as literal "predictions" never works. How many times have you heard predictions about the end of the world? As I understand it, there is an independent church in Amarillo, Texas that only a few years ago decided that the end of times was here because they had discovered that the true identity of the anti-Christ—Prince Charles! Personally, I've always been convinced it's Bill Gates, but that's another matter. The bottom line is, using apocalyptic texts as literal predictions of the future of our planet—and trying to match up symbolic language with actual people and events—only leads to abuses. Abuses of power and destruction of real people's lives. Remember David Koresh in Waco Texas? And before him Jim Jones in Jonestown?

There is, however, another way to think about apocalyptic texts. A way that just may actually *be* helpful. One way to think of and interpret apocalyptic writings is as what scholars call “theopoetic” texts. In other words, poetic language used to make a theological point. As a theopoetic text, the point of Jesus’ description of the end of time is not to convince us to go sit up on a mountain top and wait for signs of the second coming. Neither is it to roll over in our beds and go back to sleep because life has no real meaning anyway. Instead, as a poetic text that is meant to make some theological point, Jesus’ description of the apocalypse can be a way for us to put suffering in context and to perhaps if not understand suffering to, at least, endure it.

In his book “WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE,” Rabbi Harold Kushner talks a lot about putting suffering into context. In one chapter tells about a Jewish legend that puts a different spin on the biblical story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. In the biblical version, Moses sees the Israelites worshiping a golden calf and is so furious he throws down the stone tablets to shatter them. According to Rabbi Kushner, an old Jewish legend tells the story a little differently. According to the legend, while Moses was climbing down the mountain with the two stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments, he had no trouble carrying them, even though they were large, heavy slabs of stone and the path was steep. This was due to the fact that even though they were heavy, those tablets had been inscribed by God and were precious to Moses. But when he came upon the people dancing around the golden calf, the legend says, the words disappeared from the stone. They were just blank stones again. And at that moment they became too heavy for Moses to hold onto. “We can bear any burden,” Rabbi Kushner says, “if we think there is a meaning to what we are doing.”

Finding meaning in life is, I believe, our ultimate purpose. That is, in fact, a significant part of what Rabbi Kushner points to in his book. Tragedies in and of themselves do not have meaning at the moment they happen to us. Tragedies do not happen as part of some grand scheme of a God who has a master plan that simply requires that some of us suffer. To believe so would be to believe that God not only allows suffering but participates in it by not preventing it. What happens in the face of tragedy is that we can give meaning to our suffering by learning from it, by growing from it, by finding ways to help others not have to experience the same loss or pain. And most certainly God is there with us to support us in that process.

You see, the truth is our world has never been, and never will be, without suffering: war, famine, mass murders, holocausts and natural disasters. And when events like these—or even when smaller, more personal events—strike our lives or the lives of people we love, that *is* the great tribulation - it *is* the end of the world as we know it. Who needs the apocalypse. In 1988 my life was falling apart! And the question for me was and for all of us is, when these disasters hit us, are we prepared to face them with a knowledge of God's love and care that can give us hope and the strength to endure them? Or do we face those trials as casual or nominal people of faith? Do we want to live our lives with commitment and trust in God? Or do we want to resign ourselves to the forces of this world that, as our baptismal covenant puts it, “destroy and corrupt the creatures of God?” Do we come with the willingness to take on responsibility for our lives? Or do we use tragedy as an excuse to abdicate our responsibility and blame God for our troubles?

There is no need to wait for the end of times. The apocalypse is here because it happens to us daily, if not to us personally, then to someone we know or someone they know. To someone who has lost a loved one. To someone who has lost a job or whose home has been destroyed by fire. To someone who is diagnosed with a fatal illness. Or to someone whose family is breaking up. And for that reason, it is important for us to remember that in this life we walk *together* in faith. A faith that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. In the face of tragedy, we walk in faith to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. Because by doing so we remind not only others, but we remind ourselves of all the blessings with which God has richly blessed us.

And it is from that position of gratitude that we can choose to live our lives not always wanting more, but by giving back. And that is why we come together today. Today is Harvest Sunday. Pledge Sunday. It's the day when we as a parish family stand up to be counted as one of God's faithful. We stand up to re-commit ourselves, our time and treasure, to the proclamation of what we believe—that death and despair ultimately no longer have any hold on us. That commitment may take the form of a financial pledge to the mission and ministry of this church. Or it may take the form of a pledge of your time to the work of this parish—as a volunteer with our altar guild, or as an usher or a reader or an acolyte, to help make our worship possible. Or it may be as a Godly Play storyteller to pass on our faith to the children of this parish. It may be as a coordinator of fellowship opportunities through the men's or women's groups of St. Peter's. Or, as a volunteer for one of our outreach or congregation growth ministries. Whatever way you choose to give back, it is by doing so that you both affirm the blessings in your life and, in the face of

tragedy, say “I will not be defined by the losses, or the pain, or the trials of this life, because I know that God loves me.”

Jesus in today’s Gospel reading wants us to wake up to the fact that the decisions we make today do have ultimate meaning. The spiritual realities we choose to see will decide whether or not we will confront the apocalypses in this world or be turned back by them. We can decide to ignore them and risk being defined by them. But we can also choose to confront them and to discover that we do have purpose in this life. We have a job to do that the world desperately needs to be done. A job that requires each of us to be agents of God’s love in a world that desperately needs to hear a message of hope.

This morning, my prayer is that we will all listen to what Jesus is saying to us. Listen to what he is saying and get up and make a difference in the world. Amen.