

“When the stars begin to fall”
First Reading: Daniel 7:13-14
Second Reading: Mark 13:24-37

Okay, I’ll confess to you what I confessed to the staff earlier this week. I am now “officially” old. It’s not because of the letter from AARP; that came years ago. It’s not due to a sudden shift in personality; Donna says I was born 40 years old. The reality of my *elderliness* was clearly evidenced late Monday night, scandalously close to being Tuesday a.m., way past my bedtime. I had not been binge-watching *Game of Thrones*, nor had I been captured by a scrolling addiction to *Reddit*. No, Exhibit 1 of my over-ripened maturity was that I had been drawn in, captured, and could not pull myself away from a program on ... C-Span. “C-Span? Here’s your pill organizer.”

The program that so enraptured me was a session of the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Riveting, right? The case before the court concerned a conflict over election redistricting that reflects today’s seemingly impassable political divide. The court was being asked to interpret if the lines marking the current electoral map offered a fair, just, and reasonable level of representation. Surprisingly, there was little to no agreement about what that map should look like. The arguments and opinions brought before the court, and the justice’s questions to the litigants were percussive and rapid-

fire. It was obvious that the justices were not keen on doing the legislature's job for them, and that the legislature had failed to offer an agreeable remedy to the question of what constitutes a fair and just electoral map. Doesn't it just get your heart racing?

As the attorneys and witnesses took turns standing in the unenviable and mortifying position behind the lectern, facing the intimidating and unrelenting gaze and interrogation of seven Supreme Court Justices it became apparent there was to be no easy resolution to the impasse, but certainly not because of a lack of opinions.

Acknowledging this, Justice Rebecca Dallet explained the problem before the court. Each political party had firm, self-interested convictions about what a fair map would look like, and these disparate convictions were irreconcilable. So, every map the litigant and the defendant would propose to the court would have the thumb of their political party on it, tilting it in favor of the party presenting it. That is seldom the path toward truth or fairness. In his classic novel, *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy lamented, "They never agreed in any opinion, and had long, indeed, been accustomed to jeer without anger, each at the other's incorrigible aberrations." I can only

imagine how Tolstoy would react in today's unrelenting, 24/7, flood of online opinions that unapologetically mimic what Mark Twain had, with tongue in cheek, confessed — "I am not one of those who in expressing opinions confine themselves to facts."

Your opinion is typically not nearly as aligned with settled fact as you think it is, but we live in an age where opinions are constantly presented as settled fact, leaving no room for reality or understanding or mutual growth. And if we act that way with things as trifling as the color of an appliance, a referee's call, or Taylor vs. Bad Bunny, how can we ever hope to navigate the complexity of weightier societal issues like international detente, educational policy, global warming, racial reconciliation, the future of democracy, or economic distress?

Yes, we live in a perilous time. All manner of clear and present dangers imperil our very existence, but guess what? The same could be said about the people in Mark's church who first read today's text; just as the same could be said about those disciples hearing Jesus express these thoughts as they sat on the Mount of Olives looking across to the temple mount in the heart of Jerusalem. In every age there are threats imperiling

our very existence and these threats give birth to a gigabyte of strident opinions dispensed as settled truths on every platform available at the time, from a self-proclaimed prophet's mouth in ancient Israel to everything from old school cable to TikTok in today's media addicted world.

Consider that from the days of exile to the time of Jesus' public ministry, Israel's very existence was continuously threatened by a succession of dominant foreign powers. Assyria was followed by Babylon, was followed by Persia, was followed by Greece, was followed by Rome. Israel had always lived atop the shaky fence between existence and dissolution; and opinions concerning their future or fate were never in short supply. For every prophet ordained to be included in the canon of Scripture, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of false prophets peddling opinions heavily weighted by the thumb of their agendas.

Jesus walked among a people on edge. Would Rome crush them? Would famine return once again? Would a messiah rescue them, fight for them, deliver them from Rome's heavy hand? Such environments are vulnerable to the creeping dense fog of pessimism.

Pessimism seems to be the easiest of acquired skills. I saw a Far Side cartoon this week. The setting is Hell. Satan, pitchfork in hand is standing with an assistant appraising the newest arrival — Before them sits what appears to be an heirloom Longaberger basket (*the woven kind with the nice wooden handles*), and the basket is holding the earth. So, Satan says to the assistant, “Well, that happened sooner than I thought.” Even Satan was less pessimistic than we tend to be. So, when the threats are real and creeping, everyone with an opinion is buckling themselves into that basket for this world’s roller coaster ride to hell.

One thing you have to say about Jesus is that he did not hesitate to address, and occasionally even justify our greatest fears. Today’s reading is the conclusion to what is often referred to as Mark’s *Little Apocalypse*, which strikes me as the equivalent of a contained nuclear blast, an acceptable casualty, being a little pregnant, or the classic Yogiism — “Nobody goes to that restaurant anymore, it’s too crowded.” A little Apocalypse?

The Apocalypse refers to the end of days, the world’s consummation, often depicted as a cataclysmic event that brings the world as we know it to an end. In Scripture, Apocalypse is a literary genre in which God **reveals**

cosmic mysteries through a human intermediary, hence the title of the Canon's last book, *Revelation*. The book of Revelation contains 22 chapters. Mark's Apocalypse is one chapter, thus the reference to a "little" Apocalypse. The book of Daniel, as referenced in our first reading today, also falls within the genre of Apocalyptic.

The apocalyptic literature in scripture, rich with wild, fantastical imagery, has always been vulnerable to misinterpretation, particularly in the last century as a multitude of voices have tried to map out the Apocalypse like a *Times* crossword puzzle, connecting these otherworldly images in Mark and Revelation and Daniel with specific individuals and events and dates, as if they can therefore predict the players and places central to the cataclysmic end of the world as we know it. Indeed, there is a large segment in the Christian community in America whose rabid support of conservatives in Israel, is not about the cause of Israel, but is an effort to preserve and manage the stage for the Apocalypse and Armageddon.

However, people a whole lot smarter than I am tell us that staging Armageddon and predicting its timing were never the intention of Scripture's Apocalyptic literature. Rather, the purpose of such texts is to

grant hope and the confidence to persevere to believers in perilous times. No less than we are today, the people following Jesus during that first Holy Week were confronted by a variety of frightening threats that were not going to disappear with a few verses of *Jesus Loves Me*.

Jesus understood that and honestly addresses that. Jesus does not ignore or sugarcoat the suffering that humans endure and will continue to endure in a broken, sinful, and volatile world. Jesus doesn't ignore the reality that in every age, it is true when we say, "There are rough days ahead." You know that ... not only because you read the news, but because you're living it. The calls from your adult children celebrating their first paycheck from their career track job may give you that sudden gleeful rush, "We did it! They're out there. They're making it. They're thriving. Finally, we can breathe!"

But the next day the phone rings again. Your parent has fallen. There will be surgery and rehab ... and after that independent living will not be an option again. "There are rough days ahead." You know that. You are living that, or you at least you know others who are living that. They are watching the news. There's an attack on a kibbutz in southern Israel. The phone rings,

a cousin and her spouse have been murdered leaving two, now parentless, children. The next day the shocked relatives are on a plane to Israel, because they're the closest remaining family and those children will need a home. There are rough days ahead...

Jesus doesn't deny or rationalize the fragility of life as we know it. There will be rough days ahead. Jesus warns, *"As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me."* For a number of those who first heard those words from Jesus lips, that observation would be all too true. Jesus says, *"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name."* What sounds like a trailer for the next season of Netflix is the lived experience of so many through the centuries, even today.

Suffering is seldom, if ever, redemptive in itself, but suffering need not banish hope. That's what compels Jesus in this message to his followers, for Jesus knows that the social media of the time was saturated with voices of certitude erroneously claiming insider information about the threats of the

day. Yes, the more things change, the more they remain the same. As the wisdom of Ecclesiastes observes, *“There is nothing new under the sun.”* Everyone with an opinion is so certain they hold the truth. Listen to Jesus’ words in the context of the newsfeed tailored to your bias that you regularly consume. Then Jesus began to say to them, *“Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray ... And if anyone says to you at that time, ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘Look! There he is!’—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.”*

In perilous times, Jesus knows we give too much power to these voices, so much so that in this information age, we are perhaps more misinformed than ever. So, with rich imagery, redolent of the mystery of God’s creation, Jesus passionately challenges us to mute the volume of those voices so that we may pay attention to the one voice that will help us to filter all the others.

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the

powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” It’s as if Jesus is saying, *Hey, all these voices and self-proclaimed prophets out there peddling their predictions of who, what, when, and where all things will come to an end? They don’t know what they are talking about. Clueless.*

With these mysterious cosmic images, it is as if Jesus is saying, *Listen, when I come back, you’ll know it. You won’t miss it or confuse it with something else. So, in the meantime, stop trying to nail down what you cannot know, and listen to my voice, my word. Trust that I know what I’m doing, and that my love will not let you go, and that God is faithful and will accomplish what God has set out to do.* As we will sing in a few moments, *My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall.* Pretend you are from Missouri, you’ll know it when you see it.

Now we can’t escape one problem with our text today, specifically where it is stated: “This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” Well, that didn’t happen ... so, that has scholars asking,

were those Jesus' words, or were they Mark's embellishment? After all, Paul would make the same mistake. Many early Christians believed Christ would return and tie everything up with a neat little bow during their lifetime, but they were wrong, and had to reframe their understanding, coming to realize they had mistakingly converged Christ's return with Christ's presence, ie, the Spirit of the risen Christ. Christ is present to us through his Spirit, now, through his word, through his unfailing, ever-present, and always active love and light.

Look, it's as if the text auto-corrected itself in the next verses, communicating what Christ had elsewhere made clear: *"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."* Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

There are so many mysteries that we will never grasp but there is always the truth of a love and a purpose we can trust. Hope, through the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, is resilient because the love of God is steadfast. So much remains a mystery to us, as evidenced in the intentionally obscure imagery of the text today with its falling stars and a

darkened sun and moon, yet the mystery that remains does not diminish the steadfast love and trustworthy purpose that is revealed in Jesus.

In the desert of western Utah, there is an array of 507 surface detector stations arranged in a square grid that covers {270 sq miles}. A joint experiment between the University of Utah and the University of Tokyo, called The Fly's Eye experiment, its purpose is to observe high energy cosmic rays that reach the earth from distant space. In 1991, the stations there detected the highest energy subatomic particle from a cosmic ray ever observed. They observed a subatomic particle (*that's smaller than a single atom*) containing the energy equivalent to taking a brick and from waist height dropping it on your toe. The astrophysicists were shocked because there is nothing in our galaxy that has the power to produce it, and "the particle had more energy than was theoretically possible for cosmic rays traveling to Earth from other galaxies. Simply put, the particle should not exist." (Lisa Potter, *The University of Utah*)

Guess what the astrophysicists named it? The Oh-My-God particle. Every discovery testifies to the reality that we haven't even scratched the surface of the mystery of Creation. Yet, amidst all those mysteries, amidst

the chaos and inexplicable harm we manage to do to each other and to God's green earth, amidst all the confusion and misinformed opinion about what the future may hold, amidst our presumptions and questions, these truths remain — God's love is steadfast; Christ's Lordship and promise of return can be trusted. So, let us turn down the volume out there long enough to center ourselves in the voice, wisdom, and word of Christ our King. As God proclaimed at Jesus' transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." Amen.