

Isaiah 64: 1-9  
Psalm 80: 14-19  
Mark 13: 24-37

Stars Falling from Heaven  
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The world is always ending somewhere. The world is always beginning somewhere. The world ends with a gunshot, a sudden phone call, a slammed door. The world begins with a kind word, a baby's first cry, a welcome to the table. Stars seem to fall from heaven, either in a shower of piecing brilliant suffering that sends us reeling, or in a display of radiance that leaves us profoundly awestruck and grateful. God's world is a place of endings and beginnings.

The popular culture of course, picks all this up with a vengeance. R.E.M. gave us the hit song "It's the end of the world as we know it. (And I feel fine)" back in the late 1980's. But in the last decade or so, there has been a positive avalanche of apocalyptic films, where we are threatened with the end of the world. Zombies figure prominently in this genre: *World War Z*, *Zombie Apocalypse*, etc., etc. And superheroes are important: *X-Men: Apocalypse* is in the movie pipeline. I especially love it when the filmmakers feel the need to make a sequel: like *Resident Evil 2: Apocalypse*. (Let's extend the end of the world endlessly!) Apparently, the end of the world as we know it is endlessly fascinating to large numbers of people and it is big business.

We might come to worship at church to escape from this onslaught. Welcome to the readings for the first Sunday in Advent. When I first started reading the lectionary cycle of readings in the Bible, years ago, it came as a bit of a surprise that we enter the season of peace and hope and joy with words like "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" and like "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light." Every year, on the first Sunday of Advent, we are told to read a little apocalypse. That is actually what this speech Jesus gives just outside Jerusalem is called, when he describes what the world will look like when he returns: "The Little Apocalypse."

I sometimes wish that I could be welcomed into Advent in a more hospitable, or comforting way. This reading does not invite me warmly into the season: it yanks the door open, throws a cup of cold water in my face, and pushes me through. This mini-apocalypse calls me to remember the whole story of Jesus, not just the cuddly baby part of the tradition. It calls me to look to the future as well as the past. It tells me again: The world is always ending somewhere. The world is always beginning somewhere. God's world is a place of endings... and beginnings.

Because when I listen, I begin to hear what Jesus is trying to do with these descriptions. He is not using apocalyptic images to scare me to death, but to assure his followers that the healing of the world is coming. And to remind them to stay alert, to stay awake and to learn to read the signs of the times. Notice Jesus does not say, cower, or duck your head, or take cover. In a similar passage in the Gospel of Luke, we hear: "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." In this setting, there is a difference between vigilance and fear. We are urged towards practices and attitudes that will keep us centered and grounded in our daily lives so that when the world is ending- or beginning – we will still have our feet beneath us. When the stars fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens are shaken, we will remember who is Lord of the Heavens.

We have become so accustomed to the modern definition of the word apocalypse that we forget its original meaning. It simply means, revealing something, or lifting the veil off something previously hidden. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the hiddenness of God, the way the people feel separated from God. They know of the tradition, when, as he writes, God “did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.” But they look around and see a broken city, ruined fields. They crave an end of this reality and the birth of new intimacy of God. Things are bad, and the only way they can live is if God were to “tear open the heavens and come down.” They need an apocalypse, the revealing of the hidden God. They know they need an interior transformation to be able to perceive and greet their God.

In so many ways, we yearn for the same interior transformation. We need the altered perceptions that Advent offers. To those who are suffering, as were the people of Isaiah’s Israel and Jesus’ Jerusalem, our Scriptures say, “change is coming, healing is on the way.” To those who are comfortable, our Scriptures say, “take another look at the world, and you may notice that some serious changes are in order.”

This season lets us consider how the world is ending, for ourselves and for others. I think of those who will face the holidays without a particular loved one at the table, either because of death or estrangement. Or of those who will be living in new homes, where the old traditions do not fit. I think of neighborhoods in American cities that have been torn apart by racial tensions and police violence. I think of the destruction of ancient cities, like Damascus, one of the oldest cities in the world, and of the lives of its citizens that will never be the same. On an ecological level, I think of extinctions and loss of habitat.

I do not think of these things so that I can be glum when everyone else is feeling celebratory. There is something more important going on here. I am trying to keep awake, because I believe that even now, the stars are falling from heaven. Even now, the world can begin again. When I crack my heart open, I feel compassion for those whose holidays are muted by loss or change. There are ways for us to reach out to them. When I speak with my African-American sisters and brothers, I feel outrage over the wounds of racial injustice. So what can I do with this outrage – something new has to be born here. I feel heartsick over the destruction that has raged in the Middle East for over a decade – so I pray and advocate for a new world there. And all of us, I think, recognize that the losses and wounds suffered by our environment will need the healing efforts of every citizen.

Here, in this spiritual community, we marry the outward view of the needs of the world with an inward view of spiritual growth. We have mission projects and advocacy initiatives. We also have a contemplative prayer group. We recognize here that outward and inner transformation are inseparable – there is a mysterious interaction here. Never is this more clear than in the season of Advent. Those who practice contemplative prayer do so because they want new worlds to be born. This reminds me of a funny story Tom Kinder told about a contemplative who (usually) successfully keep the busy thoughts of the “monkey mind” as bay while at prayer. This allowed him to be deeply receptive to the Spirit of God within. But, one time, he had such a brilliant thought for the solution of world hunger that he had to exit his prayer long enough to make a note on a little piece of paper. The he returned to prayer. When he finished and picked up his note, it said “Xerox doughnuts.” ;) Not all deep thoughts are rooted in real life. Perhaps we need a worshipping community to work out the details of new worlds to be born.

Some endings and beginnings are wonderful to watch. When a couple gives birth to a child, their world changes so much that you might say that it ends – certainly, the world of unbroken sleep and complete freedom ends. But what a wonderful new world it is! And then, if they have another child, the beautiful threesome is totally broken up. The 3-person family is over (and, by the way, more sleep loss and less free time) and the 4-person family begins. Maybe the challenge for the rest of us is to see the possibilities in all our transformations, not just the suffering.

We turn our eyes towards the heavens, looking for signs from above, but Jesus tells us to be rooted, like the fig tree, in the life of the earth. Somehow, in the rhythm of each day and season, Jesus tells us to practice the apocalypse, revealing what is truly going on. He calls us to do the things that will open our eyes, boost our courage and unlock our compassion. We do this not just to perceive ultimate endings and beginnings, but to recognize Christ now, even today. It may sound strange, after my earlier rant about the film industry, but, in a sense, we are told to live in the apocalypse as a daily practice. We see the destruction that is always taking place in the world, and then we live in ways to bring healing and new life to each person and to the whole of creation.

So, this Advent, may the heavens open and be revealed, may the stars of joy and insight fall from heaven, and may we stay awake to God's love being born in the world. Amen.