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In 1912, as political events were churning toward World War I, the French poet Charles Péguy wrote a book-length poem about God and hope, “The Portal of the Mystery of Hope.” In part, it read:

The [virtue] I love best, says God, is hope. Faith doesn’t surprise me ... [creation is so resplendent] ... Charity ... doesn’t surprise me ... these poor creatures ... unless they had a heart of stone, how could they not have love? ... But hope, says God, that is something that surprises me. Even me ... That these poor children see how things are going and believe ... That is surprising and it’s by far the greatest marvel of our grace. And I’m surprised by it myself.

Péguy’s poem could be considered a reflection on apocalypse. We may think of apocalyptic literature as fire-and-brimstone scenarios of the end of the world when evildoers will get their public comeuppance. But, it is not really as much about the fate of evil as about God’s exaltation of the innocent. Apocalypse is promise.

Today, the Book of Daniel and Mark’s Gospel invite us into the apocalyptic mindset, a point of view that, in summary, proclaims that the worst of times will give birth to the best of times. Apocalypse simply means revelation or “uncovering.” Apocalypse uncovers the hidden trajectory of the world.

The trick to appreciating such revelation is that, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, you have to hunger and thirst for the turnabout it offers. You have to be so thoroughly distraught by current events that you echo Job’s gut-wrenching protest against evil and the suffering of the innocent. It is almost as if to understand the apocalyptic, you have to take your stand just a hair’s breadth away from despair while remaining sensitive enough to distinguish the Spirit’s whisperings midst the uproar of chaos.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus uses natural and supernatural images to tell his friends about the confusion and turmoil they will witness. While he may well have been referring to the time of his passion, they also remembered his words as they witnessed the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Those events and their own persecution caused the disciples unimaginable disorientation, leaving them feeling as if their world had come to an end.

Jesus warns them that time and space will no longer make sense. The sun that tells the time, the moon that marks the seasons, and the stars by which earthlings can orient themselves, all those will falter. But, says Jesus, that will also be the sign that they should watch for the Son of Man coming in power and glory.

Apocalyptic visions present a panorama of destruction that will affect everyone, but not everyone will respond in the same way. Some will prepare for the apocalypse like those frightened citizens in the 1960s who dug shelters to save themselves from a nuclear war. People spent a great deal of time and energy (not to mention a good amount of money) creating an illusion of security, even to the point of teaching school children how to duck and cover in case of a nuclear attack. Jesus warned his disciples to avoid that sort of behavior.

What alternative does Jesus offer? Hope against hope. The hope Jesus offers is the hope he lived. In the words of theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Hope is ... the conviction that God is at work in our lives and in our world.” Rather than optimism based on good odds or our own resources, hope is the certainty that God can transform any situation into an occasion of grace.

At the same time, Jesus warns us “of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Jesus went to the cross believing that God would raise him “on the third day” which meant in God’s good time. Jesus preached about an apocalypse to invite his disciples to share his hope, to believe that God continues to be at work on behalf of beloved humanity even when, or perhaps most especially when, we do not perceive it.

If we want to learn apocalyptic hope, we must abandon our desire to duck and cover, to hide ourselves from the suffering of the world. If we anesthetize ourselves and hide from suffering, we will be no better off than people hiding from an atomic holocaust in a windowless basement. All we will accomplish will be to blind ourselves to what is happening — both the evil and the hidden good. But, if we are willing to face the fear, to share the suffering, to denounce the evil, then, we will be able to perceive the presence of the Son of Man.

Péguy’s apocalypse, like Jesus’ preaching, invites us to surprise ourselves and God with the courage to hope.

DANIEL 12:1-3

The Book of Daniel was written around 165 B.C.E. and stars a hero, Daniel, who supposedly lived about 300 years earlier. The first part of the book is more or less historical fiction. The next section, from which our readings for this week and next are taken, is apocalyptic literature, a genre that usually deals with the end of the world and a final judgment in which the just will be vindicated.

With a good sprinkling of complex symbolism and the presence of angels and demons and even monsters, apocalyptic literature is difficult to interpret. The American Catholic Study Bible comments that apocalyptic literature is something that “liberal Christians tend to avoid ... while fundamentalists too easily adapt it to their own ends.”

Scholars generally agree that the Book of Daniel was written for Jewish people undergoing severe persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes around 167 B.C.E. According to 2 Maccabees 5:11-14, this king who styled himself as a divine epiphany, massacred 40,000 Jews and took the same number into slavery.

In those circumstances, Daniel 12 promised that Michael, a great heavenly prince or angel, the protector of Israel, would arise to guard the people. Daniel is the only book of the Hebrew Scriptures that mentions Michael, but he appears later in the Book of Revelation (12:7-9) and Jude (1:9). Michael’s appearance in Daniel 12 is a promise of comfort based on Daniel 10 where he promised to fight for Israel.

More important in this reading than the intervention of angels is the promise that some who sleep in the dust of the earth shall live forever while others suffer everlasting disgrace. This is the clearest promise of eternal life found in the Hebrew Scriptures and a warning that the unrighteous will not get away with evil forever.

Finally, this selection explains in beautifully simple language that the role of the wise is to lead others to justice. Perhaps extreme situations, described here as “unsurpassed in distress since nations began,” are what draw forth the light of the righteous to “be like the stars.” This reading encourages us not to look for super powered angels but to remember the heroes like Harriet Tubman in the 1850s, Bonhoeffer in World War II, Dorothy Day in the 1960s, the Berrigans, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Stang, and others whose lives proclaim their hope and trust in God, no matter what powers evil unleashes against them.

Apocalyptic literature ultimately makes the same promise as the psalms: The just will flourish and the wicked blow away like chaff. When we feel we are going through the worst of times, apocalyptic literature calls us to faithfulness, reminding us that we can be, or at least we can follow, the stars of God’s justice.

PSALMS 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11

We use these same verses of Psalm 16 for the Monday after Easter, the only difference being that at Easter our refrain is

“Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.”

The first half of the psalm celebrates the God of Israel over false gods and their worshippers. Our refrain, “You are my inheritance,” could not be more apt for this Sunday which calls us to look at the end of time. The psalm interprets all the apocalyptic images from that trusting outlook, perceiving them as signs of God’s gracious coming.

The three verses we sing each have a rich message. While we may think of food and drink with the phrase “You are my portion and cup,” the portion refers to the promised land the people inherited, the land that made them who they were. The cup is most likely the cup of solidarity shared among the members of the community. For the psalmist, the combination of land and communion with God and others provided everything necessary for security.

The second stanza reminds us of the earthiness of the Hebrew tradition of prayer. We translate heart, soul and body for the original words: heart, liver and flesh. (See Irene Nowell, *Sing a New Song*.) Originally, this stanza would have referred to rescue from physical danger — most probably from enemies. Later, as belief in life after death began to develop, it would have taken on a deeper meaning.

The final stanza serves as a prayer of discernment from the first moments in which we try to discover and choose our vocation through the countless decisions we make day by day. We proclaim that our goal is always to choose the path of life God offers, trusting that there is no other way that will bring us greater happiness.

HEBREWS 10:11-14, 18

Before the Second Vatican Council, a great deal of both Catholic and Protestant spirituality concentrated on Jesus’ great suffering to atone for human sinfulness. The sign that God loved us was that Jesus suffered so much to pay the price of our sin. That kind of thinking, based on a superficial interpretation of St. Anselm’s 11th century theology, communicated something of God’s love for humanity, but the image of God it presented eclipsed love’s tenderness. We were left with images of God and Christ the judge like what the early American evangelist Jonathan Edwards preached in his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

It seems that since the day Adam and Eve discovered that they were ashamed to appear naked before God, humanity has tried to perform sacrifices to take away sins. But as today’s reading from Hebrews tells us, even daily sacrifice does not accomplish the goal. Instead, Hebrews assures us that Christ offered the one sacrifice that truly brought forgiveness of sins. While Anselm taught that Christ brought redemption by making satisfaction for humanity’s sinfulness, the author of Hebrews focuses not on repayment, but forgiveness. In other words, the focus shifts from human attempts to placate or make up for their sin to the God whose will to forgive is greater than any offense, including the crucifixion of Christ.

Christ’s life-long revelation of God’s readiness to forgive is the offering that perfects believers, not because they have become faultless, but because they accept God’s love of them in their frailty.

Today’s selection from Hebrews is the last we will hear in this liturgical year. The selections we have heard during the past weeks all point to the uniqueness of Christ’s work of salvation for us. Although the letter focuses on temple practices and a priesthood we no longer know, its message is as new and challenging today as in the first century. In the broadest possible terms, the selections we have recently heard proclaim that Christ is the unique Son of God, God’s greatest gift to humanity. Hebrews calls us to recognize and accept God’s love, knowing that the more we receive it, the more we will be impelled to share it.

MARK 13:24-32

Today’s Gospel incident follows almost immediately on last week’s when Jesus condemned the Temple practices. After deserting the Temple precincts, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives from where he and the disciples could overlook the Temple area. When Peter, James and John asked Jesus about the coming destruction, he launched into a description of the times of tribulation that were to come. The selection we hear is almost the end of this discourse.

In what precedes today’s reading, Jesus explained that false saviors would come in his name, that there would be historical and natural calamities (wars, earthquakes), and persecutions as well. He punctuated his dire predictions with promises, including that the Gospel would be preached to the whole world before the end and that the Spirit would always

inspire the faithful disciples in the midst of their sufferings and betrayals. These predictions echo what we heard from Daniel, repeating the idea that the tribulations will be such as have never before been seen. Nevertheless, the disciples can take comfort because Jesus has forewarned them and they can rest assured that the evil of that day will not be the last word.

The disciples had asked Jesus when all of this would take place. To indicate how unanswerable their question was, Jesus answered symbolically, saying that the sun and moon would be darkened and the stars would be falling. Because the sun and moon and stars are the measures of time and space — the sun marking the hours, the moon the months, and the stars being used as travel guides on land and sea — that meant that time and space as they knew it would no longer make sense. It would be as if the universe were starting over again from the beginning.

In sum, Jesus tells the disciples that when everything ceases to make sense, when wars and disasters make it seem as if evil and chaos have the final word, they will discover the Son of Man coming on the clouds. Then they will see his glory and power.

When Mark says that Jesus will send out his angels, his Greek vocabulary is rich with meaning. The word he uses for send is the root of the word apostle and the word for angel or messenger shares its root with the word for the Gospel. Mark's terminology is tailored to assure the disciples that they will not be lost.

It is worth detaining ourselves for a moment on the title "Son of Man." The image we have from this Gospel, augmented other Scriptures and artistic depictions of Jesus' final coming that were fearsome like that of Michelangelo's last judgment scene. If we look at what Mark has told us about Jesus as the Son of Man, we will realize that such images are misinterpretations. A close examination of Mark's Gospel shows us that the Son of Man is the one who forgives sin (2:10), is the permissive lord of the Sabbath (2:28), who will suffer and rise (10:21), and the one who has come to serve and give his life for all (10:45). The Son of Man who will come in the clouds is the long-awaited one, the liberator and savior whom they long to see.

The primitive Christian community lived on tip-toe, knowing that persecution could come at any moment, and they longed for an end to the suffering and injustice they saw all around them. Today, some of our brothers and sisters still face religious persecution while others of us feel powerless in the face of rampant violence and cruel injustice. The more these realities challenge us, the more apocalyptic literature offers us hope. But, that hope comes with the caveat that we be willing to proclaim our faith in spite of threats of persecution or mockery and to mourn in solidarity with the victims of injustice. When we do that, we will understand the promise of apocalypse. We may well perceive the Son of Man appearing in our midst.

Planning: 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

This is the Sunday designated by Pope Francis as the World Day of the Poor. That fits nicely with the Campaign for Human Development collection in the U.S. today, though I don't think the pope chose this date for that reason. Planners might take a little time to read the pope's message from November 2017. (Search the web for "2017 World Day of the Poor papal message.")

"This Day is meant, above all," Francis wrote in his 2017 address, "to encourage believers to react against a culture of discard and waste, and to embrace the culture of encounter. At the same time, everyone, independent of religious affiliation, is invited to openness and sharing with the poor through concrete signs of solidarity and fraternity. God created the heavens and the earth for all; yet sadly some have erected barriers, walls and fences, betraying the original gift meant for all humanity, with none excluded (Nov. 19, 2017; #6).

Beyond praying for the poor, the Holy Father challenges us to interact with the poor, to worship with them, and to offer concrete assistance. Liturgy planners might arrange a meeting with the social justice committee of the parish, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, or whatever groups focus on the needs of the poor. Such a meeting might produce joint actions

to make this annual observance a vital part of parish life. For some ideas, check out the efforts of the Diocese of Arlington in 2017. (Visit

www.arlingtondiocese.org/2017worlddayofthepoor for details.)

Catholic Relief Services posted additional resources in 2017 in English and Spanish, including intercessions. (Search the web for “CRS 2017 World Day of Prayer.”)

It is understandable that liturgy planners focus their attention mainly on prayer and worship, but our worship is not authentic if it does not lead us to live the Gospel throughout the week. This World Day of the Poor is another opportunity to help people make the vital connections between worship and our daily lives.

Next Sunday is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. This might be a good time for planners to look back at the long stretch of Ordinary Time to evaluate what was celebrated well and what could use improvement next year. We naturally concentrate on the festal seasons (and surely are planning Advent/Christmas now) but good worship is important every Sunday and deserves our continual efforts at improvement.

Thursday of this week is Thanksgiving Day in the U.S. What time would work best for people to gather for Eucharist, our great prayer of thanksgiving? Many are busy with meal preparations on Thursday morning. Would an evening Mass or Evening Prayer on Wednesday work for your community?

Prayers: 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Ekerdt

Introduction

As the liturgical year draws to an end, the church uses the Scriptures to turn the hearts and minds of her people to the life to come. How will we know when the end is coming? We do not know the day or the hour. But we know that in God’s own time, when light shines and triumphs over darkness, and when justice and love rules over all, then time as we know it will no longer matter and God’s second coming will be upon us.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you are wisdom shining brightly in our midst, Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are justice for all ages, Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you now and always show us the path of life, Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of the church, of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For all of us, for never failing awareness that we will one day be called to account for what we have done and what we have failed to do, we pray,

- For all leaders and citizens — for the ability to listen to one another with genuine humility, to reach across the divisions in our midst and build consensus to promote the common good, we pray,
- For the bishops of the United States as they finish their national meeting this week, for wisdom and for courage, to make decisions that bring light to the darkness and hope to our people, we pray,
- For grace poured out and received among us — to stand with the poor, the immigrant, the vulnerable and the prisoner and to lead the many to justice, we pray,

- During this Thanksgiving week, for grace to step beyond the duty of routine and the frenzy of busyness to cherish the many gifts that are ours, to be mindful of gratitude as a way of life, we pray,
- For the sick of the parish; for all who live with dementia or mental illness, for those who face addiction each day, we pray,
- For the intentions of all gathered here and for all of our beloved dead, we pray:

Presider God, you show us the path of life, help us daily to choose to bring light to the darkness and hope. May compassion define us and love guide us as we await that day and hour when time will no longer matter and all will be transformed in your eternal grace. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

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