

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

How do you react to the Gospel text for this morning? Intellectually, viscerally, skeptically? A group of parishioners under the care of Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, complained that scripture texts like the one from Luke today were simply too overwhelming for them to grasp, and besides they were frightening as well. “Whatever should we do with this and our lack of understanding?”, they asked. Kierkegaard suggested they start with the scriptures they could grasp and live with them. “That”, he said, “should be enough to occupy you for a lifetime!” That is true enough, but their plaintive concern is well voiced. There are perhaps no other sayings of Jesus more difficult to hear, to work our way through, to know how to respond to, than these. The language is frankly foreign both to our ears and our way of thinking in a modern world, and we could be tempted to simply pass over them for something more familiar and palatable. (I have to confess to thinking, “Aren’t we in a season of light and celebration?! Why this killjoy stuff?”). Nevertheless, Apocalyptic phrases and images, however we may feel about them, are part of the witness and message of the tradition and are worthy of our hearing if we can get to the heart of the truth they seek to convey. By the way, unlike the popularized belief, apocalyptic doesn’t mean the end of the world, but to unveil what is hidden.

So, let us try to re-frame this and get a window on the way we see and approach these words/images about endings and beginnings, threats and promises, losses and hope. Many years ago, I had a coworker who was coming up on a family celebration. It was his spouse’s birthday and while the exact number eludes my memory, it was a fairly significant one. A few days prior to the turning of the calendar I inquired what plans had been made for the big day. Maybe a surprise party or dinner at an upscale venue or a night away from the regular rhythms of life seemed like reasonable guesses, and maybe some custom jewelry. ‘Oh, nothing special’ was the reply. “You know I have asked her a couple of times what she wanted, and she said, ‘Nothing really’, so I have no plans”! (How do you think that is going work, Einstein?! Truthfully, would you believe ‘Nothing’? What was behind her response? Was it not likely an affirmation that whatever he did out of love for her would be welcomed!!? Here is the point; from an apocalyptic view behind every no is likely a yes to something else waiting to be discovered. Behind negations there are usually affirmations, and beyond endings there are new beginnings. We must look with care and listen deeply to catch them.

Let’s use that frame and hear these words which Jesus speaks, some of which come from the Book of Daniel. “There will be signs in sun and moon, perplexity among nations, people struck with fear...for the powers of the heavens will be shaken...heaven and earth will pass away”. Now that is pretty heavy stuff and people use it as a fear tactic, but I think it is merely a powerful way of stating a basic reality: **be careful about placing your trust in what is temporal**. The negative here is all things pass away. The positive is the call to look at what doesn’t--”My Word (Divine Activity) will not pass.

I have been re-reading St. Thomas Aquinas, who bases his theological method on Aristotle. You know that the Greek philosophers along with modern thinkers like Newton, Galileo, and Fred

Hoyle thought that creation and matter are permanent; it always had been and always would be. That appears not to be the case. The Big Bang brought what is into being, and it is in constant change. It is temporal.

Cultures, economics, nations, politics are as well. Remember when Jesus spoke it was during a time when the Peace of Rome was deemed unshakeable, yet that turned out to be an illusion when the Goths raided the Empire.

And we too, are temporal. It is a reality we come to know regularly. The world does pass away. Don’t you think the people in Oxford, Michigan live in that shadow? What are we to say to all of this or do with it? What happens when we run headlong into negations-‘No’s’? Jesus speaks of fear overtaking humans, and it is fear that darkens the world more than perhaps any other stance or emotion. It leads us to forget who we are in this life. It leads us to seek security and permanence in places and ways that are neither secure nor permanent. And, it leads us to see each other as threats rather than fellow sojourners. Fear separates and tears apart.

Let me suggest this morning that we are offered these negations in the Gospel—words of “NO”, for a deeper purpose—to lead us to not be tempted to trust what passes away and isn’t worthy of trust. We are offered a vision elsewhere which is on the mercy and grace of the divine whose love for creation transcends temporary brokenness. There is a “YES” lurking behind Jesus apocalyptic language; it is found in what we call HOPE. Hope is not the same thing as wishful thinking. Hope is placing ourselves and our destiny on what and who we trust in light of His nature. That allows hope to reside in the human heart and mind, bringing resilience and courage, and transforming endings into beginnings. We often say that the future is shaped by the present. There is truth in that. However, it is also true that the future shapes the present. What we look forward to creates part of the moment we have now. Consider marriage. It is belief in the promises of the partners that forms how they will live out their union. Our life goals, yet to be fulfilled, affect the present. Our trust in promises on occasion is all we have to go on and provides sustenance. Jesus’ words today beckon us to fall in love with God over and over because God is in love with us, and that is eternal.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn, a survivor of Auschwitz and writer for the BBC was sent to a concentration camp as a 13-year-old. He wrote, “For a while my father and I shared a barrack. In spite of the unspeakable horror and oppression, many Jews held on to what scraps of religious observance as they were able. One winter night one of the inmates reminded us that tonight was the first night of Chanukah, the Festival of Lights. My father constructed a little menorah out of scrap metal. For a wick he used thread from his prison uniform. For oil, butter he somehow had obtained from a prison guard. Such observances were strictly ‘verboden’, but we were used to such risks. Yet, I protested the “waste” of such calories. Would it not be better to share the butter on a crust of bread that to burn it?”

“Hugo”, said my father, “both you and I know that a person can live a very long time without food. But Hugo, I tell you, a person cannot live a single day without hope!!The Menorah is the fire of Hope. Never let it go out—no here—not Anywhere!!

This is the great Yes behind what is temporal. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words—activity for you—will never pass away. And there are signs in this moment and place of the hope to be seen around us. It does require eyes attuned to our hearts as well as minds, to relationships more than possessions, to love rather than hate, fear, or apathy. But the signs are here... The people

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of God who reject power misused and misnamed. It is among the faithful who refuse internecine strife, the mistreatment of others, who reject blindness toward suffering, and choose love and the one final action worthy of the Name of Christ. We are people who though fallible and frail, who when the foundations of life are shaken and shattered, personally and together, seek the source and Giver of life. His way of life is the only possible one with a future. Hope is to be found in places like this which are havens of light, courage, confidence, and that welcome those who are afraid and seek to live without fear and darkness. There is a great 'YES' awaiting us all. It is experienced through the trust that God is good on His promises. Amen+