

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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Proper 28; Mark 13:1-8

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”
Hebrews 10:16

It seems you can't turn on the TV or pick up a book now-a-days without stumbling across zombies. They are everywhere! If you are one of the few uninitiated, the zombie apocalypse is a particular scenario within apocalyptic fiction in which a widespread rise of zombies takes over and destroys human civilization. In some stories, victims of zombies may become zombies themselves if they are bitten by zombies or they catch a zombie-creating virus; in others, everyone who dies, whatever the cause, becomes one of the undead. Either way, the outbreak creates a “zombie plague” that swamps law enforcement, military, and health care services, leading to the panicked collapse of civilized society until only a few pockets of survivors remain.

As silly as all this may sound, the zombie apocalypse literary genre can provide an interesting lens through which one may explore the nature of humanity, civilization, and human relationships. When my family started watching the wildly popular TV series *The Walking Dead*, it was a few years into its now eight-year run. I was not interested in watching it for a long time because zombie stories really aren't my thing. First of all, I get scared easily, so I spent most of the first two seasons with my eyes covered and ears plugged. Second, I also get grossed out easily, so I don't particularly enjoy watching decaying undead people ripping off body parts and spurting blood. Third, I couldn't imagine watching season after season of a TV series that was just about some sad remnant of humanity in a constant state of either running away from zombies or killing them.

But around the third season of watching *The Walking Dead*, I realized that my attitude toward the show had shifted and I became engrossed in the story. I found fascinating the growing realization of the characters, as well as audience, that the greatest threat wasn't really the zombie undead. Rather the most dangerous creatures out there were the other fearful humans. The show then became for me an interesting commentary on the joys and weaknesses of human nature and a fascinating illustration of how one tries to remain human and in community when the civilized rules of society no longer make sense.

Most of the terror of the first two seasons was concerned with people who were waiting for the zombies to invade wherever they were hiding, and the show's tension mostly resided in this fearful waiting. The show's focus of fear, however, began to shift to what happens when humans become untethered from the civil contract and begin to lose their humanity. For these folks who remained alive, they had to find a way to build a new society. More than that, they had to find ways to retain their essential humanity – they had to identify and hold dear what values kept them human. Like is true in most apocalyptic themes, the zombie apocalypse genre illustrates that one must look beyond appearances to see the truth.

Our text from Mark's Gospel today is one that I always find jarring. Called the “little apocalypse,” it is a reading that never fails to surprise and frighten me. An apocalypse is defined as a disclosure of hidden knowledge or revelation. It is most commonly associated with

prophetic revelations of eschatology, or the end times, and were obtained through dreams or visions.

Mark's little apocalypse is steeped in ancient Jewish apocalyptic thought. Central to such thinking is the belief that God controls history, that the world has become so evil that only God can save it, and that God will rescue the world from evil at the time of God's own choosing, establishing a new creation in which God's righteousness reigns.

The scene for Mark's little apocalypse has Jesus leaving the Temple, after having just denounced the scribes and religious leaders for being self-serving hypocrites and then observed the poor widow depositing her two copper coins in the treasury. Jesus' disciples marvel aloud to him about the size and grandeur of the temple, saying: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Jesus replies quickly: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." While apocalyptic thought would have been commonplace among first century Jews, many still would have been offended by Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction. For while that thought held that nearly everything would be destroyed and made new, surely the Temple – God's footstool on earth and the symbol of Israel's special relationship with God – would remain.

Our text then continues with a few of Jesus' closest disciples coming to him to ask what the signs of this terrible event will be. Jesus then describes a frightening scene of coming environmental upheavals, wars, famines, and false prophets – all painting an apocalyptic picture of the destruction of civil society and the erosion of the social contract. These descriptions are classic examples of apocalyptic imagery, so one has to wonder what truth is revealed beyond the appearances.

Many scholars believe that Jesus was an apocalyptic Jew, and he used this sort of dream language imagery as a means to communicate God's more subtle – but no less transformative – workings beneath the surface. But we know from scripture and history that, at least on the surface, things did not work out quite the way these sayings predicted. The Christ, the Messiah, was always anticipated to be a great military and political hero, along the lines of King David. He would lead the revolution that, backed by God, would overthrow their gentile oppressors and restore Israel to its proper glory – to be the light unto the nations, calling them to the one true God by their light. Jesus used apocalyptic imagery to explain how God is working through him to accomplish just this, even as he tried to explain that things would be a bit different than they expect. "My kingdom is not of this world," he says more than once.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus enacted great deeds of power that could only happen because of God's indwelling presence, and yet even his disciples continually wondered, "Who is this Jesus?" He both was and wasn't who they expected. Likewise his enemies were uncertain what to make of him – he just didn't live up to expectations. He was a great healer, teacher, prophet, and preacher – he seemed blessed with God's presence and authority – and at the same time he consorted with sinners, protected the outcasts and unloved, and allowed himself to be killed by his enemies in a horrible and deeply shameful way. What sort of Messiah was this? This is precisely the question we have asked over and over again these past two millennia. I believe we have to look beyond appearances to see the truth.

Earlier this week, I discovered a poem that was quoted as a preface to novel I just began reading. The poem is called *Waiting for the Barbarians* and it was written by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy written at the turn of the 20th century. Indulge me a moment as I read an excerpt to you now.

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
The barbarians are to arrive today.

Why such inaction in the Senate?
Why do the Senators sit and pass no laws?
Because the barbarians are due to arrive today.
What further laws can the Senators pass?

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate,
in state, wearing the crown?
Because the barbarians are coming today
and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader.
He's even got a scroll to give him,
loaded with titles, with imposing names.

...
Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?
Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
Some people arrived from the frontiers, and they said there are no longer any
barbarians.

And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

Sometimes, we prefer a common external enemy upon whom we may focus our attention and our fear. There is a well-known saying that nothing brings people together like a shared enemy. But this is a flimsy foundation for our community – it is indeed like building our house on sandy soil – for the barbarians are often not really the problem...or the solution. Time and again, Jesus teaches that the real solution for societal change may be found within the human heart. The revolution of society will come not from a military or political uprising, nor from an invasion by another political force, but rather from the truly transformative and powerful work of the revolution of the heart.

That is the power of Jesus' ministry. That is the promised salvation. And nothing less than the transformation of each human heart is what is required. And when that happens, God's law will no longer need to be etched on stone tablets that can be broken, because we will be guided by God's law (God's very impression) written within our hearts.

It is for this reason that the temple can and will be destroyed time and again, both figuratively and literally, for we no longer need the holy tabernacle to contain a precious remnant of the holy. Indeed, we never really did, for the holy is within us and always present, always accessible. The tabernacles of today serve as signposts pointing to the truth beyond the appearances and remind us of the divine presence written for all time within us and upon our hearts.

Amen.