

The Church of the Good Shepherd

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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

At the Mendoza home, we’ve been watching the Belgian apocalyptic sci-fi drama TV series called *Into the Night*. Like much of this genre, it is an edge-of-your-seat thriller that starts with apocalyptic and existential crisis. In this case, some sort of solar magnetic polarity inversion has caused the sunlight to become radioactive and essentially microwaves all life. We follow a group of international strangers whose plane is hijacked by an Italian NATO soldier who overhears of this impending disaster and forces the red-eye flight from Brussels to take off early. As this group of passengers and crew begin to understand the global disaster they are in, they attempt to outrun the sun by continually flying west. All the while, trying to figure out what is going on and how to survive. For all I know this is probably a very sketchy scientific premise (what do I know about solar magnetic polarity?), but it sure is crazy fun to watch.

As is often the case with this sort of plot premise of the demise of human civilization, the plot eventually shifts its focus beyond the immediate crisis to the exploration of just what sort of civilization will emerge when all societal structures and cultural touchpoints are destroyed. Upon what moral basis will this haphazard collection of people ground their community? How will human relations function when absolute scarcity is a dominant force? The post-apocalyptic literary genre has often been used to provide a lens through which one may explore the nature of humanity, civilization, and human relationships.

As typically happens with these types of storylines, at some point we begin to realize that the greatest threat no longer is this outside enemy – in this case, the sun – but rather the other human survivors. Shows like *Into the Night* become 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.

The drama of the first season focuses entirely on the small gathering of survivors on this hijacked plane, but the season ends with them finally making their way off the plane and to NATO bunker located beneath a hydroelectric dam and finding other survivors there. The second season now focuses on the building some sort of civil community with this ragtag international collection of politicians, military soldiers, and civilians. But they can’t stay in the bunker indefinitely – resources are limited – and they begin to realize that other similar groups of survivors are also out there and competing with them to survive. Through this crisis, not only do our group of strangers need to solve what seems to be an insurmountable problem, but they also need to build a civil society together and identify and hold dear the values that keep them human.

On an individual level, each survivor begins to realize that they have been fundamentally changed by this experience – they are no longer the people they once were. We watch as they come to terms with the sins and pains of the past and transform into new people – some for the better, some for the worse, but often in ways that are unanticipated. Like is true in most apocalyptic themes, the show illustrates that one needs to look beyond surface appearances to see the truth.

After remembering our dearly departed on the Feast of All Souls and celebrating the saints of the church, past, present, and future, on the Feast of All Saints, the themes in our Sunday Gospel lessons now begin to point ahead toward the season of Advent. The King is coming! There will be

cataclysmic changes in the way we worship and in our relationship with God. It is not too soon to begin to prepare oneself for the cosmic shift coming.

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 deeply unsettle 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 observing 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!" They expect him to marvel at it with them. But 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 must 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 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 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. Yet again, we need to look beyond appearances to see the truth.

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 outside enemies 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 breaking open and 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.