

Advent 1B: Mark 13:24-37
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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Making Meaning in the Face of an Apocalypse

For many years, the chaplain at Duke University teamed up with an economics professor to teach a freshmen seminar entitled the *Search for Meaning in Life*. It was sort of a philosophy class that looked at the various ways people have found meaning in their life. Early on, the professors came up with the idea to open the class by having students respond to what they called the Parable of the Deserted Island. They told the students, “Imagine that you are on a voyage of discovery back in the fifteenth century. Your ship goes down in a storm, and you find yourself as the sole survivor on a deserted island. Nobody knows you are there, and there is no hope of rescue. Fortunately, there is water and food available on the island. However, you are all alone. What would you do?” The professors’ intention was for the students to ponder what they would do in a situation where they are thrown back on their own resources.

Some of the students, taking pride in their resourcefulness and creativity, announced they would build boats out of the materials they found on the island. That was how they would save themselves. The teachers scoffed at the idea. “So you think you could build a boat that would safely take you across the Pacific?”

Others said they would try to make the best of a difficult situation by using their time on the island to think long thoughts, to be alone with their ideas, and to ponder things that they had not previously had time to think about. These were the solitary philosophers. Unlike the boat-builders, they hoped to redeem their time on the island through introspection and contemplation. Some of them said they would write poetry. The teachers ridiculed their ideas too, “You would write poems in the sand? *That* would be enough to keep you going?”

But in every class, there were students who simply opted out. “If I was completely alone, with no other people on the island, then I would end my life. I would have no reason for living with no one else on the island with me. With nothing to do and no place to go, I’m sure I would go crazy. That would not be a life worth living.”

The professors started with this parable because it seemed to them symbolic of the dilemma the students faced as they began their adult lives: they are essentially alone, having to fend for themselves. And it’s up to each of them to find meaning in life, up to them to find reason to go on living.

To make the point even clearer, the professors had the students watch the movie *Groundhog Day*. You know, the one where Bill Murray plays a weatherman who, for some strange reason, is forced to relive the same day over and over again. After they watched it, they’d say to the students, “Get it? This is your life, the same pointless stuff over and over again... unless you take charge and carve out an interesting life for yourself, a reason to get out of bed in the morning.”

That's the message we all—not just college students but all of us—have received since we were children, isn't it? We are all individuals, on our own, and it's up to us to decide what we are to do with our lives. It's as if each of us is alone on our own deserted island and have to find a reason to live.

Now, if this is indeed our lot, it's no wonder that many of us spend our lives rushing from thing to thing, busily trying this and that, hoping that we will be lucky enough to grab onto that thing that will make life worth living. A job, family, wealth, sexual conquests, toys—whatever will dull the ache of emptiness, if only for the moment.

But then we hear Jesus' words in today's gospel and we are brought up short. For Jesus announces this morning that we are in fact *not* alone. We are *not* left to our own devices. Not only has God come near in the past but he is coming to us. Here's how our Gospel lesson puts it: "The sun will become dark, and the moon won't give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory." God is coming, in the person of Jesus, bringing with him not peace and comfort, but the end of the old world and the beginning of a whole new life.

And this puts a real challenge to our attempts to make meaning for ourselves. With Christ's coming, his advent, all of our attempts to give our life purpose, to build a life worth having, will be shown to be futile. All our striving, all our plans, all our efforts to establish ourselves, will be proved useless, revealed as trivial, indeed misguided. For, Jesus' coming means that the future will not be determined by our efforts, by our trying to steer events the right way, to put ourselves "on the right side of history," as the Communists claimed. Everything we do—as individuals, as families, as nations—will be relativized, qualified, by the actions of God, by God's interruption and disruption of our world. God will put an end to everything we have built. Our achievements and our failures, our legacies, good and bad, will in the end not matter one bit. When God shows up, he will break open our world and create a whole new world for those who love him.

If you've never heard it before, this news can be quite shocking. We generally assume tomorrow will be pretty much like today, with incremental improvements, in an orderly, gradual, upward progression. Step-by-step, day-by-day we're getting better and better in every way. And maybe we think that that's how God works, by guiding human society towards successive improvements we call "progress." But, if the Scriptures are any indication, God is not known in gradual, upward development. Rather, when God shows up, it is a divine intrusion in our world, with a radical discontinuity what has gone before, a marked break in the orderly progression of things and the irruption of a whole new order.

David Bentley Hart, an Orthodox theologian, draws a sharp distinction between this reality and the way Christianity is often taken. Hart writes: "Christianity entered human history not as a new creed or a path of wisdom or a system of religious observances, but as *apocalypse*: the sudden unveiling of a mystery hidden in God before the foundation of the world in a historical event [that doesn't have] any possible precedent or any conceivable sequel." In other words, Christianity does not exist to maintain order or a tradition, but rather to keep alive an alertness,

an awakesness, to God's breaking into our world, into our lives. Christianity, he argues, exists to enable us to maintain a habit of being open to apocalypse, to God showing up.

As strange as that sounds, I think most of us would admit that our life with God rarely proceeds in a direct progression. There are often lurches to the left, jerks to the right, or pushes into places we would not have gone on our own. Often it's like: "I was doing fine, minding my own business, just getting by, and then comes God. Bff! I was comfortable in my routine: get up, go to work, come home, eat, go to sleep, wake up, go to work, then do it all over again. But then comes God." No gradual growth, no controlled development. Just bff! And life is never the same.

Something like this can happen when we learn we have a terminal disease, when, not only will tomorrow not be the same as today, but that there may not even be a tomorrow. I know a man who was a dedicated head of a booming business, working long hours. But the day he was diagnosed with stage-three cancer, he quit work. He cleaned out his desk, walked off the job, and went home to his family. Fortunately, he lived longer than he first anticipated, more than a decade. But he says he never regretted the opportunity the notice of his impending death gave him to change his life's direction.

And yet that's not exactly what the coming of Jesus means. There's a difference, you see, between knowing that your life may end due to your death, and knowing your life as you know it may end on account of the advent of God. There's a difference between living your life every day with somber thoughts of your impending death and living your life aware that at any time, sooner or later, God will come, ending your way of life and starting a new way forward.

Joan had at last finished college, the first in her family to do so. Her mother had mentioned law school; her father urged her to think about a job in business management. She was leaning toward the law school option and had even taken the law entrance exam and checked out the websites of two schools. Then one afternoon, at the tutoring program where she volunteered twice a week, a little girl said to her, "You explain things so good. I wish you were my teacher." She said it was like "a light came on in my heart. For the first time I knew for sure what God wanted me to do with my life." She is now an elementary school teacher. Everything was moving along just fine; then God showed up. Bff! Her life path ended, and a new path began.

To be sure, when God comes to us in our place and time to instigate change in us, that change can be costly, even painful. But that pain is but labor pangs that accompany the birth of something new that we could not create for ourselves.

Michael learned early from his parents to fear and shun people of other races. "I kept to my world, and everything was okay as long as they kept to their world," he said. "It was the way I was brought up. I didn't want to harm them, but I didn't want them to come close to me." Then he heard a sermon that changed everything. Or more accurately, he heard a sermon that God used to change everything. The preacher was saying something about Jesus and his love for everyone, and somehow, some way, God showed up. "I was jerked up," was how he later described the experience. "God made me see how I had been compartmentalizing my life. God showed me that it wasn't good enough to stay in my world and let them stay in theirs. The whole world was God's world. God didn't expect me to just not hurt people who weren't like me; God expected

me to love them.” God showed up, ending the world Michael knew and giving birth to a new one.

This is what happens when Jesus comes. Everything we think has enduring value and to which we so ruthlessly cling—money, human potential, aspirations to run the world, illusions that we can protect ourselves, everything we think has meaning—all that gets ripped away by God. And then we find the one thing that makes this life mean anything, that gives us reason to get out of bed every morning—Jesus. For Jesus didn’t just come to Bethlehem some two-thousand years ago, but is coming even now, coming to establish his kingdom and bring together all of creation, everything in heaven and earth. He is the culmination of all history, the point and purpose of everything, of all life. And his showing up will not be about imposing a meaning and purpose on us, but rather about revealing the meaning and purpose that was always there, in him, and inviting us to live accordingly.

The chaplain from Duke admits that if he had to do that class over again, he would no longer start out with the Parable of the Deserted Island. Because, he says, it gives students the wrong idea that we *are* on our own, left to ourselves to figure out our place in the world, when really God promises to come to us and be our all in all, the center not just of the universe, but the center of our lives. If he taught the class today, he said, he would find a way to tell his students, who had been told in so many ways that they were alone, on their own, a very different story—a story of God coming to us, once as a helpless babe and again in glory, and of the meaning his coming gives to their lives and to the lives of everyone. For there is no greater meaning, no higher purpose than that, than to be open to God when he shows up. Thanks be to God!