

Keep Calm and Apocalypse On

The many faces of Jesus are reflected back to us in a myriad of ways:

“Away in a Manger” Jesus in our nativity sets.

“Let the Children Come to Me” Jesus in our children's Bibles

“Ascending into Paradise” Jesus in our stained glass windows

But we don't seem to be nearly as enthusiastic about “Apocalyptic Jesus.”

Apocalyptic Jesus has never inspired many cross-stitched pillows.

We find it unsettling. Confusing. Scary.

Apocalyptic writing, as a literary style, is intended to be unsettling and cryptic.

Apocalypsis, in Greek, literally means “an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known.”

It is a style of writing that emerged in later Old Testament writings and flourished during dangerous and dark times, most often when the writers and intended audiences were facing persecution.

It is cosmic in scope, the battle between good and evil playing out in earthly *and* heavenly realms.

It is infused with symbolic language and imagery, which not only heightens the mystery, but also allowed the writers to name political oppressors without having to name them, thus protecting both the writer and the reader from potential persecution.

The book of Revelation is the first book that comes to mind when we think of this type of writing, but it emerges also in the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Daniel.

John the Baptist was an apocalyptic preacher.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

And scholars refer to Mark 13 as the “little apocalypse.”
Did Jesus have an apocalyptic worldview? And what impact would that have
on our perceptions of Jesus, and the ways in which we are called to follow
him today?

I want to look at these questions in three parts:
Through the eyes of the writer of the book of Daniel
Through the eyes of Jesus
And through the eyes of the writer of the Gospel of Mark.

Part 1: Daniel

If all you know about Daniel is a fiery furnace and a lion's den you are
probably in good company.

The first six chapters of Daniel are court stories set when Israel was living in
exile in Persia.

But the last six chapters are very different.

They're actually not even written in the same language.

Like Revelation they are apocalyptic visions set as future prophecy but are
also very much about the political present.

This second half of Daniel tells of a time 500 years after the lion's den, when
the Jewish people are once again back home in Israel after being allowed to
return from exile, but are facing intense political pressure.

Alexander the Great has taken over the known world, and upon his death it
was all split up between his warring generals.

Egypt, to the South, was controlled by the Ptolemies, and the Seleucids
controlled the North.

Israel found itself right in the middle, a highway and unwilling participant in
the clash of empires, controlled by one empire, and then another.

For the most part, Israel tried to keep its head down and stay out of the
crossfire.

But in 175 BC Antiochus Epiphanes ascended to power in the Seleucid
empire, which controlled Israel at the time, and he wasn't content to just let
the Jews do their own thing.

In his line of thinking, the best way to strengthen the empire was to make
everyone conform to the Greek ways of the Seleucids.

No Torah, no Sabbath, no Jewishness.

It was a dark and threatening time for the Jewish people, and not all Jews
agreed on what faithfulness looked like under these circumstances.

The two primary views were these:

Number one: Give up your Jewish identity. Or at least pretend to. It's not
worth getting killed over

Number two: Plot with the Ptolomies from the south to overthrow Antiochus.
The enemy of your enemy is your friend. The only way to defend your faith is
by the sword.

Daniel however seems to propose a third way.

The Jewish people should not compromise their faith witness. Nor should
they engage in violent rebellion, because this is not the way of God either.

Rather, Daniel advocates for steadfastness. God would protect his own.
He speaks of this way as the way of the wise. We read it in our Daniel text
for today:

“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who
lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

Eventually, a paranoid Antiochus would turn on the Jewish people.

2 Maccabees reports:

“When these happenings were reported to the king, he thought that Judea was in revolt. Raging like a wild animal, he set out from Egypt and took Jerusalem by storm. He ordered his soldiers to cut down without mercy those whom they met and to slay those who took refuge in their houses. There was a massacre of young and old, a killing of women and children, a slaughter of virgins and infants. In the space of three days, eighty thousand were lost, forty thousand meeting a violent death, and the same number being sold into slavery.”

Part 2: Jesus

Jesus would have been familiar with this part of Jewish history and Daniel’s perspective on it.

When we think of what influenced Jesus we tend to think of the prophet Isaiah, the book of Psalms, yet if you read Jesus’ words in Mark 13 you can see Daniel’s apocalyptic fingerprints all over it.

Now almost 200 years after Antiochus, but still an oppressive empire, this time Roman, with it's boot on the neck of the Jewish people.

The comfort of the Jewish people in Jesus’ day, including the disciples at this time: The temple economy.

Robert Bryant writes:

“It's enormous stones mystified many, and the surrounding complex included sprawling courtyards, colonnaded courts, grand porches and balconies, covered walkways, and monumental stairs. Herod the great builder built it to impress the wealthiest and most powerful rulers of the day, and he succeeded.”

Certainly the temple economy would see the Jews through.

Yet upon entering Jerusalem that final time, Jesus shocks everyone by
tossing the temple tables.
Afterwards he curses a fig tree for its lack of production, a statement many
attribute to the fruitlessness of the temple economy.

And yet the disciples have obviously not picked up on this.
Walking through the temple like gawking tourists.
“Wow, look at this architectural marvel Jesus, isn’t it amazing!”
Jesus’ chilling response:
“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon
another; all will be thrown down.”

Part 3: Writer of the Gospel of Mark

Each of our four Gospels was written in a particular cultural context with a
particular audience in mind.
The words of Mark, our earliest Gospel, were written under the shadow of
another apocalypse: The Jewish-Roman war, which took place during the
years 66-70 AD, 40-50 years after Jesus.

It was a war intended to expel the Romans once and for all, to bring
Jerusalem under Jewish control and re-establish the Davidic kingdom. And
early on, the Jews had a number of astonishing victories. It actually looked
like driving the Romans out might be possible!

Pressure was being put on Mark’s community to join the battle.
Resistance fighters were going through the Palestinian countryside calling
on all Jews to join the final battle, this war that would bring the end, the
restoration of God’s people.

It is within this context that the writer of Mark recalls the words of Jesus, who gave two pieces of advice to his disciples regarding the dark days that were to come:

First, **“Beware that no one leads you astray.”** Pick your leaders well. God’s people have a history of following passionate leaders who too quickly jump to use of force and violence to achieve what they perceive as the will of God.
One cannot achieve Shalom through violence and coercion

Second, **“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.”** Be steadfast. Remain calm, remain faithful in the unsettling events to come.

In August of the year 70 the Romans overcame the Jewish insurrection and burned the temple to the ground.
It would never be built again,
Just as Jesus predicted.

First Mennonite, we don’t find ourselves under foreign occupation, but we too are living in apocalyptic times. Pandemic, climate change, political instability.
What do Jesus’ words have to say to us today?

Emilie Townes writes that
“In keeping with other apocalyptic literature, Jesus uses signs and events of the day to signal the coming of the end of the current age. Yet with this end is the birth of a new age. Remarkably, in the midst of the predictions of destruction, if not annihilation, lie the seeds of salvation.”

“Yes, we will be touched by the awful destruction of the apocalypse, as none escape it's ravages, but for those who live with a faith that seeks a deep relationship with God--one that does not rely on trite formulas or poorly developed doctrines--we find, in and through God's suffering: salvation. For the time of destruction, which is an ending, is also a beginning for people of deep faith. The new life found in salvation helps to remind us that to have new life, all things must grow and change.”

So keep calm and apocalypse on First Mennonite
Assured that the peace of Christ and the all-encompassing love and faithfulness he revealed to us will bring us through our darkest days, as it has for the generations of faithful believers that came before us.