

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Questions at Calvary Sermon Series – Theodicy, Mark 13:9-23

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

Twenty-two-year-old Salma Surrab intones: “It was the sixth of October, and it was dark ... [My cousin and I] went for a late car ride. At night, Gaza is so beautiful; it’s empty, the lights are nice, the streets are nice, and [we did not know it would be] the last time seeing [our home] in its full glory.”²

As Israel’s invasion of Gaza began, Surrab and her family fled south. In a documentary short by NBC News, she explains, “The only thing that helped me emotionally ... was my journaling book.”³ She shows the camera her thick diary, which overflows with bits of her days pasted to its pages: stamps and candy wrappers, pressed flowers and even a bullet that hit the bunker where she sheltered.

The documentary shares videos that Salma captured as her family evacuated: the homemade white flag flapping from the rear window of their car; the sound and shudder of bombs shaking her phone; the scene of her and her brother – having made the list of those granted access into Egypt – exchanging goodbyes with their loved ones at the border crossing.

Despite the relative safety of Cairo, Salma acknowledges her aching worry for her aging parents and the decimated remains of their home, their lives – all that she has left behind and all that has been taken from them. She explains, “No matter if I was in Gaza or out of Gaza, the war is still happening. *The war is in me.*”⁴

For us who follow the Christ whose power is Mercy – whose reign is Love! – we decry the savagery against the Palestinian people. Trinitarians, violence cannot justify violence, not in the Holy Land, not anywhere. For be certain that a peace won by blood will always prove a passing ceasefire, only a reprieve awaiting the next inevitable terror ... and the next ... and the next.

Moreover, these horrors – along with those in Ukraine, those in Haiti, those in our nation, *all of them* – ask people of goodwill to reconcile God’s *hopes* for the world with that world’s *brokenness*. And as we Christians now approach Holy Week, we set that necessity in conversation with the anguish of Calvary, taking up “theodicy” – the defense of the Christian God in the face of suffering.

The depravities of war acutely challenge God’s goodness with the unavoidable question: *If there is a God, and if that God is loving, and if that God is all-powerful, then how could that loving,*

omnipotent God allow these horrors to happen? From Jesus on the cross, to Salma and her people, to a world crucifying itself with violence – how can this be?

Our Gospel lesson from Mark centers Chapter 13 and witnesses the earliest Church grappling the same dilemma.⁵ On the first Sunday of Advent, we heard this apocalyptic discourse's concluding verses (13:24-37) prophesy the "Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." This November, we will hear its introduction (13:1-8), when Jesus quips, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."⁶ **Today's unsettling vision expresses the authoring community's interpretation of its own suffering in the light of their faith in Jesus as Christ.**

Within the context of Mark's narrative, Jesus does not declare that either he or the God of heaven will destroy the Temple, and he does not intend to predict the future. Thumb to Chapter 11 and recall that Jesus and his disciples enter the Temple the day after the parade of palms.⁷ Once within its walls, "Jesus upended the tables of those changing money and the chairs of those selling doves ... he began teaching and saying to them ... *you* have made [my house of prayer] a lair for bandits."⁸

After this disturbance, Jesus makes his way through the Temple's courtyards, causing further commotion and teaching the crowds and authorities who engage him along the way. Continuing his challenge of Temple practices and values, most of these teachings concern money:

- . inheritances and fair shares, in the parable of the murderous tenants;⁹
- . taxes, in his "what-belongs-to-the-emperor" exchange with those Pharisees and Herodians who sought "to trap him;"¹⁰
- . the welfare of widows, in his "they-will-get-the-most-severe-judgment" denunciation of greedy scribes.¹¹

His traveling pulpit finally brings him to the treasury court, where he and his disciples watch "the crowd [deposit] coins[, as well as] many wealthy people [offering] large sums. And one poor widow came and put in two small, copper coins, [worth a penny]."¹²

As a crescendo to his Temple teachings, Jesus directs the disciples' attention to that scene and says to them, "Amen I tell you, this poor widow [has given] more than all those who put into the treasury box."¹³ This declaration pulls taught the line Jesus knotted at the money changers' overturned tables and ratcheted again and again in his teachings that followed: **the transformation of the world depends upon generous love and *not* transactional power.**

Immediately after these moving scenes, *then* Jesus and the friends emerge from the courts and "one of his disciples [says] to him, 'Teacher, look! What stones! And what buildings!'" The exclamation must have prompted an exasperated sigh before Jesus imagined the Temple's

overturned stones: *Have you not heard anything I've said? These grand buildings mean nothing in the coming reign of God!*

In context, Jesus seeks to persuade, to support his condemnation of the Temple cult, a system he views as complicit in the malevolent conspiracy he battles. Within Mark's story, Jesus does not intend his claim as a prediction;¹⁴ rather, *the authors of Mark* present it as such by tethering the saying to the apocalyptic discourse. They deliberately arrange the order of their Gospel to answer theodicy's demanding questions, to make sense of their own circumstances.

The authors reinforce their Advent hope – “Lo, he comes, with clouds descending”¹⁵ – by threading *their* recent past and present experiences into the vision of an apocalypse. Therefore, we can suppose that *the authors* were experiencing wars, and rumors of wars, and a “desolating sacrilege” arriving with such urgency that they and their families could not even return home to grab a coat.¹⁶ These details support their interpretation of the cataclysms they have endured as God's will, as part of God's greater plan.

While that nascent Church surely grieved its world's brokenness, they chose as a comfort the promise that as God raised Jesus from the dead, God would – in time – save them. Moreover, that *future* salvation would give meaning to their *present* sufferings. **As those experiencing oppression, their theology subordinated God's love to God's power.**

In addition to expressing a suffering people's effort to *understand* God's role in their struggle, Jesus' vision also expresses the early Christians' discernment of how God calls them to *act* in such a circumstance.¹⁷ With the painful labor of the world's rebirth underway, the apocalypse inspires their community's faithful response as *endurance*. Jesus affirms those who endure through their persecution, even when the political strife becomes personal, even when that conflict reaches one's own household.¹⁸

For us these thousands of years later, political partisans still employ apocalypticism tactics to support their claims, each side envisioning a different outlook depending upon how our current behaviors will either change or continue. Election ads and stump speeches that seemingly “predict the future” serve as meaning-making mechanisms for understanding our *present* condition: whether refugees bless our cities or curse them; whether our nation responds to the world's wars with movements for peacemaking or provisions of arms for retribution; whether we voters view ourselves with a responsibility for our neighbor's well-being, or whether we view the body politic transactionally, as an instrument for serving only our own interests and desires.

Realize that our individual agency, collective power, and global privilege distinguish our contemporary American situation from that of Mark's authors and those authors' communities. Therefore, we can faithfully honor *their* endeavor of theodicy ... we can faithfully inherit *their* faith in the risen Jesus ... *and* we can reconcile our common theological dilemma *differently*. Indeed, our different circumstances *demand* a different reconciliation.

In its powerlessness, the early Church believed that only God's dramatic intervention could right the scales. For this reason, their theology called them to *accept* and to *endure* as the primary expressions of their faith. God called them *to wait*.

Yet, for us who *have* power, who *have* privilege, such a vision of God too conveniently reinforces the status quo – the way things are – and excuses us from accepting our complicity in the world's horrors, as well as our opportunity to inaugurate a different order. Therefore, **we subordinate God's power, to God's Love:**

- . See, if our loving God were all powerful, then God's beloved people would not suffer;

- . and if God could save one from suffering, then God would save all, for all of us are loved fully and loved equally;

- . yet, because God has not saved all from suffering, then we must accept that God cannot save any ... not alone.

Thankfully, these hard truths also hold the hopes of our faith:

- . the reassurance that God's will is always life, and always Love, and God *never* intends suffering and will *not* torment humankind – not Jesus, not anyone;

- . the recognition of our freedom so full, so complete, that God self-limits the Divine power-to-control to share that gift with us – and, with it, the attendant responsibility to choose the good over the ill; God will not make that choice for us;

- . Therefore, if we nurture meanness, feed our greed, elect for war, then we and the world will suffer the consequences – not at God's hand, but by our own. Yet, if we share love, show mercy, and nurture compassion, then we and all people will receive the blessing of those devotions, instead.

Subordinating God's power to God's love brings the cross of Calvary to a near horizon, revealing the way of Jesus as both our mortal peril and our eternal salvation – the Holiness of the Week we approach. Yet, when we join ourselves to the God of Love, the peace we can achieve by our common care and concern, rather than by compulsion, that peace *is* our salvation – not made meaningful by a future redemption, but fulfilled in the very moment of its expression. And that peace – *God's Peace*, “which passes all understanding”¹⁹ – that peace will finally endure.

We love as companions in the household of God,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² “[Salma’s Diary of the War in Gaza: How Her Journal Saved Her Life](#).” NBC News. March 14, 2024.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In last year’s Holy Week sermon series, we explored theodicy through the work of Leslie Weatherhead. While resonant with those ideas, this year turns us to scripture as our primary resource: what does the Gospel of Mark say about the dilemma? To answer that question (and with the permission of our diocesan bishop), today we read Mark 13:9-23, a passage typically skipped by our Lectionary.

⁶ The penultimate Sunday of the liturgical year, the beginning of the “Little Apocalypse” anticipates the celebration of “Reign of Christ” the following week.

⁷ 11:1-15a.

⁸ 11:15b-17. From the *Mark As Story* (Rhoads, et al, Third Edition 2012) translation.

⁹ Mark 12:1-12.

¹⁰ Mark 12:13-17.

¹¹ Mark 12:38-40.

¹² Mark 12:41-42. Edited (to avoid redundant vocabulary) from the NRSV.

¹³ Mark 12:43, from the *Mark As Story* translation.

¹⁴ A more contemporary example of a similar dynamic: On October 20, 2001, at the benefit “Concert for New York City,” derivative keyboardist Billy Joel played “Miami 2017,” from his third-to-least-offensive album, 1976’s *Turnstiles*. He sang, “I’ve seen the lights go out on Broadway; I saw the ruins at my feet . . . I’ve seen the lights go out on Broadway; I’ve watched the mighty skyline fall.” Did that lyric make Billy Joel a prophet? Sweet Jesus, *no*. Electing for the most shopworn cliché he could have chosen – the dimming of Broadway’s lights – he expressed his self-interested grief about changes in New York City’s culture. That night one month after the World Trade Centers collapsed, Joel acknowledged, “I wrote that song twenty-five years ago, and I thought it was gonna be a science-fiction song; I never thought it would really happen.” Joel did not intend to predict the future: in the song’s story world, the destruction of the city’s skyline remained an imaginative future.

¹⁵ Welsey, Charles. “Lo! he comes, with clouds descending.” *The Hymnal 1982*, The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985, 57-58, v. 1.

¹⁶ Mark 13:7,14-16.

¹⁷ Our faithful understanding and our ideal action (hopefully) never far disconnected from each other.

¹⁸ Mark 13:13: “[Y]ou will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

¹⁹ Philippians 4:7, as we often pray the verse in the Blessing to conclude Sunday worship.