

A bag piper tells the story. I play many gigs. Recently I was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the back country. As I was not familiar with the backwoods, I got lost. I finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral guy had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch. I felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. I went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. I didn't know what else to do, so I started to play.

The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. I played out my heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. I played like I've never played before for this homeless man. And as I played 'Amazing Grace,' the workers began to weep. They wept, I wept, we all wept together. When I finished, I packed up my instrument and started for my car. Though my head hung low, my heart was full. As I opened the door to my car, I heard one of the workers say, "I never seen nuthin' like that before – and I've been installing septic tanks for 20 years." (from an email)

Every year as we finish the season of Ordinary Time, the church invites us into the apocalyptic mindset, a point of view that, in summary, proclaims that the worst of times will give birth to the best of times. Apocalypse simply means revelation or 'uncovering.' Apocalypse uncovers the hidden trajectory of the world. It reminds us that God is in charge – always has been and always will be – despite the evidence to the contrary. We also need to remind ourselves that apocalyptic writing is not so much speculation about the future but rather a strong claim about the present age. And yet the scope of Jesus' teaching is larger than commentary on the present age and its difficulties. If we read the whole of this chapter 13 of Mark's gospel, we read that the disciples ask for signs and dates and Jesus speaks of the end of the age: wars, famines, earthquakes, a darkened sun and moon, and stars falling from the sky. These are typical apocalyptic images. Because this type of literature was popular at the time of Jesus, those who heard these words would not have been afraid – they would have been assured. For apocalyptic literature is always about God winning in the end. Those who heard these words knew how the story ends. Because the sun and moon are the measures of time and space- the sun marking the hours, the moon the months, and the stars being used as travel guides on land and sea – that meant that time and space as they knew it would no longer make sense. It would be as if the universe were starting over again from the beginning. In sum, Jesus tells the disciples – and us – that when everything ceases to make sense, when wars and disasters make it seem as if evil and chaos will have the final word, we will discover the Son of Man coming on the clouds. When Mark says that Jesus will 'send out His angels,' the Greek vocabulary is rich with meaning. The word Jesus uses for send is the root of the word apostle and the word for angel or messenger shares its root with the word for Gospel. Mark's terminology is tailored to assure the disciples they will not be lost. And with all these cosmic images, we are being told that God promises a wide, coming future. What God is doing is large, infinite, and cosmic. This is good news indeed. (help from CELEBRATION, 18 Nov 2018, p. 1,3, and Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, 18 Nov 2018, p. 21)

Second, so how does any of this have to do with us? Well, nothing about us is built to last. Everything in this universe has an expiration date. Jesus' last will and testament – here toward the end of Mark's Gospel, toward the end of Jesus' earthly ministry – tells the truth: precariousness, transitory reality, endlessly dying and new things being born – stars falling and fig trees sprouting. This generation passing away. This is simply the way life is. And for those who have faith, this is good news. For all of this endless dying means that there is endless new beginnings.

I read about an exchange with a university professor and a pastor who works with the homeless. The professor asked the pastor how he persevered in this shoe-string ministry for over two decades. The pastor waved his hand over the desolation of the downtown area and explained, "I know a secret: all this is transient." With a living God, anything we build, including any evil we construct, is all temporary, transient, dying in order to be reborn. Apocalyptic, cataclysmic discourse is reminding us "This end is the beginning; this death is birth."

Toward the end of His teaching ministry in Mark's Gospel, Jesus lets us in on a secret: the world is torn apart, the veil in the temple is ripped by God, so that a new world might be made available by God. SO -- the end of a marriage, the last day at the company, the pink slip at work, a rejection letter from medical school, the empty nest, the death of our beloved -- by God's grace, these endings may be birth pangs, an offer of a new world. It all depends on a God whose eternal love is our only hope. (Willimon, IBID, p. 22-23)

Finally, some practical application of apocalyptic belief. From time to time, every one of us goes through the kind of major collapse that Jesus predicted. Our theological, social, physical, political worlds suddenly disappear. A loved one dies suddenly, our portfolio dives just as we are about to retire, an unexpected layoff, an announcement by a spouse that they are leaving, the Bishop calls while I'm on vacation and says he has a new plan for my life! Unscheduled and traumatic change is a fact of everyone's life. And we do not skate easily through it.

And while the *change* can happen in an instant, our *transition* that the change requires is a slow, often very painful process. It is how we psychologically adjust to the change. It entails grieving over what has been lost, feeling we are without our bearings, and looking forward to something new. The problem is when we are in the midst of transition, we find it difficult to envision the new. We have to take T.S. Eliot's difficult advice:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope/For hope would be hope for the wrong thing." (East Coker, in FOUR QUARTETS) The time of transition can be characterized as that moment when the trapeze artist has let go of one bar and has not yet grabbed the next bar. It is midair living. The identity we had is gone and the identity we will have has not yet arrived. So, depending on the intensity and duration of the transition, we gain a reputation as not being ourselves. We eat too little or too much. We slough off work or become non-stop activity. We are silent when we need to talk and talk when we should be silent. We are tired of our friends asking how we are and hurt when they do not ask. In that in-between time of transitions we have joined that legion of our fellow human beings who, in a past moment of arrogant stability, we labeled as 'not knowing their derriere from their elbow.' (although we usually say it more colorfully out of church). Welcome to confusion so profound it is anatomical. Unhelpful friends say "life goes on, and so will you." And we want to kill them.....IN A CHRISTIAN WAY, OF COURSE!

With a bit of a spiritual outlook, we take a different tack. We do not hurry into a new reality, a new security. We have to understand that there is potential in the present process of floundering. It is not in the hope of reaching the next bar but in the interval of being between bars. The potential is in midair living.

Spirituality teachers suggest that the in-between time is an opportunity to remember that we are always more than what is happening to us. We are not only immersed in transition, we transcend it. Our soul is not only related to the changing temporal order but to the unchanging eternal order.

When we lead a stable life on the physical, psychological, and social levels, this spiritual truth often eludes us. When disruption occurs -- and we either choose or are forced to change -- an invitation emerges in

the middle of the transition. Since we are between earthly stabilities, we may just shift awareness to our heavenly, deeper connection. In doing this, we can develop our spiritual potential.

In mystical, biblical terms the in-between time is the third day of creation. On that day God drew up out of the waters dry land and separated 'the waters under the sky' from the dry land (Gen 1:9, 13). The waters symbolize the formlessness and turmoil of transition. The appearance of dry land gives us a place to stand in the midst of the swift and dangerous currents. What God did on the third day of creation, God does every day. Divine reality is always supplying a place to stand. However, we most need this divine grounding when we have lost our human grounding, when we are in the midair between the bars.

Apocalyptic reminds us that this life is a life of constant change. To cease changing, to cease growing, is to die. This is true personally – but it is also true of parish life, church life, work and political life. We can either lament this changing state of affairs, berate those who nudge us through it, or take the option offered by Christ: enjoy this life of constant change – as it is the unexpected gift of midair living. And God is with us through it all. Amen. (last section adapted from Shea, EATING WITH THE BRIDEGROOM, p. 271-274)