

Today's Gospel reading is a little apocalyptic. It's not quite as dramatic as the verses in Luke that come before it, but it's certainly in the same zone. "There will be signs," Jesus says, "in the sun, the moon, and the stars and ... People will faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world" It's formidable stuff and really should have us asking: what's coming?

If you've ever heard of the Left Behind series of books you might hold a particular idea of what might be coming. The Left Behind stories are about the "end times" – a time when the Christian faithful have been spirited away to blissful safety and everyone else on earth is *left behind* to fend for themselves as the world descends into violent chaos. Even if you've never read any of the books or even heard of this franchise, chances are you're familiar with this type of literalist, apocalyptic theology.

The Apocalyptic biblical texts have inspired interpretations like these in Western European and Anglo-American culture particularly, for centuries. In these cultural contexts, the apocalypse is often interpreted as an actual future time in which God's judgement will literally and violently be experienced by everyone not confessing faith in Jesus Christ. It's the big and final transformation of the world that many long for, it's an act of vengeful divine judgement that many consider will finally put the world to rights.

The promise of catastrophe, chaos and collapse, followed by some form of reformed and righteous new world order is a story of retributive change that's deep in our mainstream cultural dna. It's an enduring story in which morally bankrupt power systems are smashed and replaced by 'the good guys,' or an immoral and hedonistic culture is laid waste to make way for the thriving of the worthy. It's a story of change and transformation that's entirely dependent on the absolute exercised power of divine judgement, and it doesn't need us at all.

And this can feel like something of a relief, because making change happen is hard, changing the world and making it a better place, arguably, is harder still. Change costs a lot energy-wise and it can be risky. We might very well be frustrated with the way things are, harmed even, by the way life is, by the way the world is, but the cost and all the possible risks associated with bringing change, that can be reason enough to keep us holding on to the familiar: better the devil you know. We're culturally encouraged, instead, to wait, wait for God, wait for God to do the big thing; let's wait and hope and pray for that to happen, for that day to finally come. Then things will be better, then the world will be sorted out.

But this isn't the only way to read apocalyptic texts. Rather than describing a terrifying time in which a powerless humanity will be walloped by a punishing God, the heart of the prophetic apocalyptic genre can be understood, actually, as hope and possibility. The apocalyptic Biblical texts can be read as giving hope an extreme, and powerful expression; these texts have been crafted as a visceral response to dominating, unjust, and oppressive worldly power. The apocalyptic future vision is a vision of hope for everyone crying out for relief. Apocalyptic texts are the righteous, prophetic insistence, by and for all those desperate for change, who yearn to live fully, and to be free; these texts affirm, they insist, "this time will end."

So Apocalypse should, perhaps, more meaningfully be understood as *revelation*, and *this* as an experience that's somewhat inevitable for each of us, at some point, in each of our lives. Rather than one, single climactic event sent to impact all people at one single point in human history, apocalypse as revelation has, as its focus, a powerful, prompted/triggered shift in awareness that can lead to a mighty change of heart and mind – and it's possible at any time, for anyone. Revelation/apocalypse might be thought of as any life-altering, perhaps

even life-deconstructing, moment of insight or understanding that drives an irreversible shift in our awareness, that changes us.

The triggers for such life-altering moments are real, present, and all around us – natural disaster or war, conflict, a serious diagnosis, or the death of a beloved, a moment of felt direct encounter with the power and majesty of the natural world - any and all of these are ways we can suddenly lose our grip on the ordinary everyday life we're familiar with. These are triggers that can rupture or fracture our sense of reality and can open us up to a lasting change of perspective. An experience of awe might be our response the truth of reality being revealed. Awe is a mighty emotion, combining dread with veneration and wonder. True awe is big and it's powerful, and it can be confusing, disconcerting, frightening even. It may not be clear in the moment that it's entirely good. And it's the human response that's all tangled up in "apocalypse."

Awe, true awe, can be the result of having the truth and reality of God revealed, the truth and reality that's always and ever-present, but can get obscured; and, when we notice it, when we become aware, the full force of this shift in awareness, Jesus tells us, will be seismic, and it will bring substantial change in its wake – and, it will save us ... it will save us from despair, and from hopelessness, as we gain an embodied understanding of our very real and needed participation in a story of cosmic proportions.

Jesus, in keeping with the tradition of the Jewish prophets whose texts he would have studied and known well, Jesus repeatedly emphasizes conversion of heart and transformation of life; that our own transformation in and by faith has power enough, is mighty enough to change the world, to bring healing, peace, and justice; that true change is and must always be change from within, at the level of each individual heart and mind, a healing of the world as each one of us is changed, as each transformed life comes fully into being.

And Jesus lets us know this is rarely a gentle process. Awe will call for a response. Awe can be utterly destabilizing, and it is *a* way into freedom from the grip of a mainstream culture that will limit us, that will convince us of our powerlessness, that will stifle our humanity and discount our ability to bring healing and transformation to a world that's crying out for it. That would have us sit and wait for change to happen to us.

Life, Jesus tells us repeatedly, fullness of life must be chosen – it can only be lived with intention, and intention is born of awareness. Fullness of life and the freedom that brings must be our conscious choice, our choice to embrace it and be transformed by it. That's faith.

This season of Advent is the season for us to ask, what's coming?

And this is a season of awe. Awe that the power of our God is revealed in the birth of a baby, in possibility and promise, not in punishment. Awe in response to each one of us being called and needed to be a part of the transformation of the world, each one of us an essential and necessary part of the fabric of the cosmos and inheritors of eternal life.

Noticing the Truth is our sign that our own conversion of heart is coming, and awe is our highly appropriate response.