



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea THE FIRST SUNDAY
The Episcopal Church OF ADVENT
in Destin, Florida DECEMBER 3, 2023

[A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham](#)

On every Friday evening since October 7 of this year as the Sabbath meal begins, Rachel Goldberg goes to her home's balcony that faces southward toward Gaza and prays:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.¹

That is the blessing she normally would have pronounced at the table over her son, Hersch Goldberg-Polin. He was last seen being herded into a pick-up truck by Hamas terrorists, his left arm blown off below the elbow, his bloody forearm the site of a self-fashioned tourniquet. His fate remains unknown. But every Friday night she prays over him from afar, while acknowledging he might be dead...and hoping he might be alive. It is a stunningly poignant moment of faith, hope, and love.

The connection with today's reading is iffy at best. But it does remind us that as a young Jewish son, Jesus's mother Mary would have blessed him with the same prayer at the Sabbath meal. And it reminds us of the incredibly rich tradition and culture in which Jesus was raised.

We need to remember that when we hear this first reading from the Gospel according to Mark as our new church year begins today on this First Sunday, indeed, the first day of Advent. We need to remember that when Jesus read and studied the Bible, it was the Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament.

And unless we understand that, unless we bring a knowledge of the Old Testament to the table, today's Gospel reading will make no sense. Or worse, be misunderstood. The imagery is fantastic and far-fetched:

... [T]he sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,

¹ Numbers 6:24-26 (NRSV).

and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

And it is easily misinterpreted, because this has nothing to do with the end of the world. It has nothing to do with the Second Coming of Christ, which is a central element of our theology. But Jesus' Jewish listeners would have understood. Jesus was predicting a catastrophic historical event that would have a dramatic and pivotal impact on Jewish religious culture and practice. And as horrific as the events would be, simply describing them would have robbed his words of impact.

So Jesus turned to the Old Testament for popular and familiar words and images that conveyed his warning with a jarring force. The darkening of the sun and moon in the Old Testament, for example, would have been well-known as a sign of the destruction and demise of a kingdom. And the demise and destruction of the Temple was what Jesus foretold.

And that is exactly what happened. By 70 A.D., Jerusalem was under siege by the Romans. Josephus, the great Jewish historian describes how terrible it was as the Jews pursued an ill-fated revolution:

...[P]eople starved, ate their own babies to stay alive, fought each other both for scraps of dirty food and for small-scale political gains in the factional fighting, more Jews being killed by other Jews than by the invading Romans.²

Ultimately, the Romans "entered the city, burnt the Temple, destroyed the city, and crucified thousands of Jews."³ It was the cosmic catastrophe Jesus predicted. Thus, Jesus words in the Gospel this morning have everything to do with the Temple that had become a den of corruption and hypocrisy, as well as to the vindication of Jesus as prophet and Messiah.

In a larger sense, the Jewish nation and religion, though to be sure not its people as a whole, had lost its way. It no longer was revealing God to the world, as it had been chosen to do. And it had taken the understanding of God from one god of many, to one god who was the best and most powerful God, to the one and only God. Monotheism is their gift to us. But the Temple was emblematic of the economic exploitation, religious hypocrisy, the mutual collaboration of religious and secular leaders, and the loss of love as the foundation of the Torah, the Law. It would take Jesus to call them out, to

² N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, London: Westminster John Knox Press (2004), p. 182.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

speak truth to power, to reset the moral compass to the values of love, compassion, peace, justice, and mercy.

Are we curious why the lectionary starts the church year with this apocalyptic tone? Maybe we need to be reminded just who Jesus was, how central he is to history, how essential he is to God's vision for creation, and how meaningful to each of us he must be.

But his prophetic voice sadly also speaks with an insistent relevance to us in this early 21st century. We see churches turning a blind eye to and covering up abuse. We see preachers more concerned with the size of their jets than the enormity of God' grace. We see churches that abused and robbed native Americans of their culture in residential schools. We see the self-righteous seek the power of government to force their views on entire populations, while politicians pander to the religious just to garner votes and cloak their political aims with religious purpose. We see plowshares turned to weapons. We see words become instruments of violence and division rather than reason and reconciliation. We acknowledge war as evil and fight for peace. We watch the news and lunge at the remote to change the channel. Or do we just weep and wonder.

Do we wonder if our temples will be desecrated, that we will see the sun and moon darkened, the stars falling from heaven, and the power of heavens shaken?

On this first day of Advent, are we well into a secular Christmas season hijacked by a consumerist culture? Are we awash in pies and cakes and cookies and cocktails or craving more dearly the bread of life and cup of salvation.

Now, in fairness, said the priest whose home is embellished by two well-lit trees and a dozen cartons of decorations, we all are trying to find a balance between the Christmas we have ceded to commercial interests and the true Christmas we anticipate and prepare for during Advent. We struggle to determine whether we need to reform the culture or meet the culture where it is. Because we hardly can take Christ to the world if we cloister and isolate ourselves from the culture we hope to insinuate with the love of God in Christ. So our Christmas festivities and observances always must be tempered and balanced by our awareness that we are still looking forward to a celebration of the birth of Christ.

Here at St. Andrew's By-the-Sea we honor Advent by refraining from decorating the church for Christmas until we ready it for Christmas Eve. That's a bit tricky this year with Christmas Eve falling on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. So we will decorate the church after service on the third Sunday of Advent, but conduct our service for the Fourth Sunday of Advent in the parlor.

Until Christmas Eve then, our sanctuary will be the place of stark peace and repose where anticipation and hope are undistracted and spoiled by the glitter and gifts and visions of sugar plums.

And on December 26, as discarded Christmas trees on our curbs announce the end of the Christmas season and celebration, let us remember that Christmas recalls not an end, but a beginning. When impending doom gives way to the hope that bursts forth from incarnation of God on earth that began that cold winter night in Bethlehem.

It is like that inexplicable, but fervent hope in God's grace that Rachel Goldberg embraces and exemplifies in her prayer for her captive and wounded son each Friday as the sun sets. And it is the hope that propels us in great expectation as we prepare for our celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord now only three weeks away.