

Then Comes the End

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” True only of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*? Or true of innumerable eras, including our own?

Consider this day, these times.

- Technological developments set millions free from the drudgery of repetitive labor.
- Billions of dollars are donated annually to churches and various charities and trillions of hours are similarly shared – many of them to ease the burden of the poorest among us.
- A rebirth of interest in the spiritual dimension of life seems at last to grasp that my inner health and my relationship with God are inseparable from my connection with my fellow inhabitants of this planet, both human and animal, and with the well-being of the planet itself.
- AIDS moves from being an invariably terminal disease that all infected people die from, to being a chronic illness that infected people live with.

Even from a purely secular, human standpoint, there are reasons to be optimistic, there is reason to hope. In the midst of the “Technological Revolution,” we might call this the best of times.

But truth be told, that’s not the whole story:

- Floods here and droughts there, a metaphor of the global problem of too much in one place and not enough in another;
- A deeply divided and polarized citizenship, each group suspicious and resentful of the others’ intentions and motivations;
- Unimaginably destructive wildfires in California;
- Deeply disturbed domestic terrorists killing multitudes in a synagogue, at a dance club, and at public schools;
- Another mailing pipe bombs to those whose political views they detest; and last year, shooting up a congressional baseball practice in Alexandria;
- Intractable unrest in Israel and Palestine and much of the Arab world, and a horrific war of attrition in Yemen; and
- A too-common attitude of “I got mine, devil take the rest;”

All these things combine to suggest this is the worst of times.

The snarky smugness of the cynic seems to be the only safe and rational attitude: “For thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore.”

To just such an attitude, Jesus says, “No. No! It shall *not* be so evermore!” That is precisely the failing of both unbridled optimism during good times and unwarranted cynicism during bad. Both suffer from a form of myopia or short-sightedness, for neither comprehends the gospel’s vision of God’s promised future.

In today’s text, Jesus rehearses a fearsome cluster of events: “nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.” In a parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus adds that there will be “signs in the sun and the moon and the stars, and on earth, people

confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves... The powers of the heavens will be shaken, and people's love will grow cold." But then, instead of quoting the words of Andy Garcia to Brad Pitt in *Ocean's Eleven*, "Run and hide, run and hide," Jesus says, "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

These terrifying events are not the end, awful though they are; they are the labor pains that accompany the birthing of God's new thing – signs of God's promise, and not the promise itself.

Nor should this surprise us. As one theologian has written, visions of God's promised future "have to start more from fears than from hopes; in our alienation, we hope mostly for what we lack." Put it another way: precisely because we know the worst of times, we long for, ache for, pray for, yearn for God's Best of Times.

- Precisely because we know what it is to dread wars and be wearied by rumors of wars, we cherish the gospel's vision of *shalom*, of universal peace and justice.
- Precisely because we know the political and economical destructiveness of living with the anguish and uncertainty that results from less-than-awesome leaders proving themselves incompetent to lead, we resonate with the vision of our awesome God reigning over all "with wisdom, power and love."
- Precisely because we know what callous indifference to the needs of the most vulnerable among us looks like – disregard of the little, the least, the lost and the last of God's world – what Jesus calls "love grown cold" – we stand in awe of the passionate love of the Crucified God, opening our arms to receive and then to share the everlasting love of the One whose Love never ends and whose compassion never fails.

That's what we hope for, long for, ache for, yearn for this late Pentecost season and throughout the year. For the gospel's promise is this: ***When at last God has God's way with the world, then every human deed consistent with God's Best of Times will be consummated and fulfilled, and every deed at odds with that in-breaking Reign of Love will be utterly destroyed.*** When you and I repent of our participation – whether it be willing or unintentional – in the various isms and phobias, ideologies and fears, that plague and divide God's children, then we, though chastened, will be forgiven.

We are free, therefore, even now to do the deeds of love and mercy to which God calls us, knowing that, as one believer has put it, "There is no lost good." For all good will find its fulfillment in the love of the One whose first and second coming we are soon to celebrate: the One who embodies suffering Love triumphant over the powers of death and destruction, the One whose Love will at last be victorious over all.