

Today's apocalyptic story reminds me of two Mahayana Buddhist parables. These are parables that developed after the life of the Buddha, and reflect perhaps a less stringent attitude toward facts than the historical Buddha would have taken. In the first parable, a party of people are on a long, arduous journey to the land of their dreams. The trip is so long and hard that they lose heart, and talk about turning around. In order to keep them motivated, their leader generates the illusion of a beautiful city in which they can rest and take their ease and enjoy scenic vistas and good food. They rest in that illusion, and then are able to move on.

In the second parable, three children are playing in an abandoned house. The house begins to burn, and their father calls to them to come out immediately. But the children are having too much fun in the moment, and they don't respond to their father. So their father calls out to them again, and tells them, untruthfully, "I have various precious playthings, one for each of you, here outside the door. For one, a goat-drawn cart. For one, a deer-drawn cart. For one, an ox-drawn cart. Come out, all of you! For your sakes I have made these carts, following the desire of your own thoughts." The children of course run out of the house at once, and their lives are saved. But they are oblivious to the danger they were in, and demand the gifts their father promised them, which don't actually exist. Fortunately, "the great man, being very rich, and having treasure houses filled with gold and silver, giant clam shells and agate, had a sumptuous carriage built, decked with ornaments, surrounded with handrails and shielding, with little bells hanging from all four sides and golden cords intertwined; with pearl-studded netting stretched out over the top, and gold-flowered tassels dangling here and there; with soft and fine silk and cotton made into cushions; with superbly fine mats, their value in the thousands, pure white and spotlessly clean; with great white oxen, fat, and in the prime of life,

and endowed with great strength, their physical form lovely, yoked to the jeweled carriage. The children danced for joy, and climbing up on the carriage, they cavorted in the four directions, playing and enjoying themselves, forgetting all about the carts their father had promised them to bring them from the burning house.”

These two parables suggest that in order to get where we need to go, sometimes we have to be deceived. Of course the deception is benign, and in the case of the children, the actual reward is just as satisfying as the carts their father promised that they never got. But still, the parables imply a paradox: that to reach nirvana, a state of clarity and seeing what is, we may need to rely on illusions or fictions. It’s puzzling.

Nobody could accuse Jesus of softening the reality with lavish fictions. Quite the opposite. The disciples, innocently marveling at the monumental Temple, are told that it will be entirely demolished. When? they want to know. And Jesus paints a terrifying, anxiety-producing picture for them without answering “When”. He describes, actually, the kind of chaos that is always happening somewhere in the world: wars, and rumors of wars, nation arising against nation, earthquakes and famines. Charlatans will present themselves with misleading information, trying to influence public opinion and gain followers. I think we’ve seen that movie before.

The part of Mark 13 that the lectionary committee cut out, and I put right back in, is this terrifying set of instructions to the disciples in the midst of war and famine: You’re going to be arrested and beaten. Don’t even try to prepare your arguments; you can’t possibly know what to say. Just hope that the Holy Spirit will speak through you. Just speak the truth. If you possibly can, flee to the mountains. Get out of town as fast as you can, and if you’re slowed

down by pregnancy or a nursing child, you are flat out of luck.

All of these apocalyptic events (except the earthquakes) are the result of the human struggle for power. Mark knows about the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70, but that was preceded by ominous events of a similar nature. In 40, the emperor Caligula planned to put a statue of himself into the Temple, so violating both the rule against graven images in the Temple and the rule about worshiping only God. The local administrator could see that the Jews were ready to resist this, ready to die if they had to, and was able to avert Caligula's plan, but it was a big public trauma nevertheless, and surely stands behind this warning of persecution and disaster. There is nothing fanciful about this apocalyptic prediction; it has happened to Jerusalem before, and it is happening now around the world. This is the way it is when human beings struggle for power over others.

The word "apocalypse" means "unveiling." It doesn't actually mean "end of the world," it means "showing what's really there." This text is saying, You may think you live in a wonderful world, but in fact this is what's happening, and you need to open your eyes and see it. That's not hopeful, but if you're living under an illusion, the first step toward something else is to get rid of the illusion. In our current situation, the veil has been pulled back from the vulnerabilities in our healthcare system and our social safety net. What was often portrayed as the problem of flawed individuals has been revealed as systemic shortcomings that developed because as a society we made the political choices not to invest in human well-being. Now the world can see how we, the once mighty, have fallen.

And it is at this point in the apocalypse, Jesus says, that hope emerges. After all that suffering, after the sun is darkened and creation has been deconstructed, the "Son of Man" will

come with power and glory. What is that like? It's like the fig tree at the end of winter, when its branches get tender and buds begin to emerge. What a strikingly pastoral image that is. After skies going black and famine throughout the land, a fruit tree quickens and begins to come to life again.

Apocalyptic also reminds us that ultimate things are in God's hands. When Jesus says to rely on the Holy Spirit for what to say, it's a reminder that there's only so much that any one of us can do, and that when we've done it, we should just stop and let God do God's part. Finally getting to the disciples' question about when this all would take place, Jesus says that he has no idea and only God knows. So what the disciples—and we—need to do is be ready all the time. Do what we can do every day, and God will set the timer on the fruit trees. We can't make them leaf out or bear fruit, but they *will* do those things. That's also a reality being unveiled.

The hope of progressive Protestants in the 19th and early 20th century was that we would make steady progress toward achieving the kingdom of God on earth. That's why they worked for prison reform and abolition and temperance and suffrage for women, they actually thought it was possible to bring about the kingdom. And, at least some of them believed that Jesus was just waiting for human beings to get it done, and that as soon as we'd gotten to the right point, he'd come and begin his thousand-year reign. (That's post-millennialism.) I think white supremacy and endemic corruption have disillusioned us about our own capacity to make the kingdom of God come under our own steam. That's actually something only God can do. But what we do is live *toward* that reality. We speak and live out that reality, even though it is not the dominant reality of our world. We count on God, because God's promise is what gives life. To be ready, as Jesus tells us, is to orient ourselves toward the promise, seeing both the

ruptures and failures *and* the possibility of new life, tender green buds.

God our rock and our salvation
so much of faith is waiting
like a pregnant woman waiting in hope
like a people under siege, holding out till relief comes
like the soul lost in the darkness,
unable to see even a glimmer of light
yet stumbling through the night because somewhere out ahead,
day will surely break
God be with us in our waiting

Keep us awake in faith.
when our faith grows weary, strengthen us
when our faith grows fearful, give us courage
when our faith grows despairing, give us witnesses
and when the faith of others falters,
may we be a light in their darkness.