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You may be wondering what this text is doing in Advent, a time when, with Mary, we eagerly anticipate and prepare anew for the birth of the baby Jesus. Surely there must be some mistake, for not only does this piece of Mark’s gospel narrative fall just before the *adult* Jesus is arrested and put to death, some of its imagery is downright nightmarish. In fact, this text is often referred to as Mark’s “Little Apocalypse.”

...Have we lost our way in the church calendar? Did we take a wrong turn at the end of that long stretch of Ordinary Time and stumble headlong into the tail-end of Lent? Maybe we’re just going to cut to the chase this year and fast forward to Holy Week? We Americans do have shorter and shorter attention spans, after all.

Actually, this is interesting timing for this “Little Apocalypse” for other reasons as well. You may have heard this past week that a second Mayan reference to the world ending in 2012 has been found on a brick from ruins in southern Mexico. This discovery has really been hyped by some of the media. And yet we don’t have to dig too much deeper to discover that experts in the field are skeptical. One specialist in Mayan epigraphy told the Associated Press that the date inscribed on the brick is actually a combination of a day and month position that repeats every 52 years, and that it could correspond to similar dates in the past as well. "There's no reason it couldn't also be a date in ancient times, describing some important historical event..." he writes. “There's no future tense marking, which in my mind points more to the...date being more

historical that prophetic."¹ And, beyond that, the Institute of Anthropology and History has long said rumors of a world-ending or world-changing event in late December 2012 are a Westernized misinterpretation of Mayan calendars.²

Of course, this—hopefully—is just one of many heavily promoted doomsday predictions that have come and gone without incident. Remember when earlier this year Christian Family Radio host Harold Camping predicted Jesus would return first on May 21st and then on October 21st? His 11th and 12th failed predictions since 1978? A generation ago it was Hal Lindsey, and, just 12 years ago, Y2K.³ We're still here, but the predictions and the accompanying fear go on. I don't know about you, but I have to confess that I bought an extra jug or two of water in December 1999, you know, just in case... And with all the extreme weather we've had in the past few years, I can't help but wonder about a preacher I used to encounter on a busy Manhattan street corner, who would shout to all who passed by, "Jesus says, 'Earthquakes are coming!'" and advise us to repent before it was too late.

Yet, clearly, such terrifying prophecies don't exactly square with the God of Advent and Christmas—the one who cared enough to send us the ultimate love letter in the form of an infant. Nor are such predictions congruent with the redemptive healer and Prince of Peace that baby grew up to be... Just how many times in the bible do we hear God or angels or Jesus say, "Do not be afraid?" Surely God who would not expend so much time and energy consoling us only to seek to strike terror into our hearts?

¹ Stevenson, Mark: "Mayan 2012 Prophecy: Mexico Finds Second Reference Among Ruins." http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/25/2012-mayans-apocalypse_n_1112797.html.

² Ibid.

³ Lose, David: "If the World Were to End." *Dear Working Preacher*. http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=529, St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, November 20, 2011.

Well, here's the thing, the bible's apocalyptic texts were meant not to frighten, but to comfort and spread hope...After all, "apocalypse" simply means "revelation" or "unveiling." How could a darkened sun, a moon that couldn't give its light, stars falling from heaven, and shaken powers in the heavens, be mistaken for hope? What if, like the Mayan calendar, these images are less futuristic than cyclical or historical? What if they acknowledge a present reality, rather than predicting a dreadful tomorrow? It can, indeed, be comforting to have someone compassionately acknowledge our pain and our challenges; to know that we are not alone in them, to have our sense of reality affirmed. That alone is extremely powerful...

How do we know that is what's happening here? The author gives us a tiny clue just ten verses earlier. Says Mark 13:14, "But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains." Let the reader understand. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. *You*, dear reader, know what I'm talking about. But I'm encoding it so it stays off the radar screen of our enemies. You see, the generation to whom Mark originally spoke used this vivid, nightmarish language mixed with literal retellings of the kinds of betrayal and threats that faced community members in order to describe what they had already seen their Christian brothers and sisters experiencing....After Jesus' resurrection, his followers referred to him as "lord" or "master," suggesting that other leaders aspiring to those titles need not apply. Not the kind of thing you can imply — let alone a way of life you can live — without getting in trouble. And so Christians were dragged before local authorities, sometimes even by members of their own family. As if this weren't enough, war was on the horizon, if not already happening. That war--the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 CE--would bring the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem. Clearly these were things Mark's audience well knew and did not need to be reminded of. What they needed was comfort...and hope. Not an

oblivious or saccharine “don't worry—be happy” kind of hope. But a hope that acknowledged their extreme level of pain and grief, and the seriousness of the obstacles before saying, “Don't panic,” and not seeming to be flip about it.⁴ “I feel your pain. Do not be afraid. This too shall pass.”

But what were they to do in the meantime? Said Mark, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

You get the point: Stay watchful and awake. Be on the look-out not for a darkened sun or moon or stars falling from the sky, but for a presumably joyous homecoming, the master's return. And again, like the Mayan calendar, this might be interpreted as both history and a future cycle. For Christ *had* already returned in the resurrection. They knew that. Yet therein lay the promise, they could also trust that God would keep God's promises, and that Christ would return again. And so they could endure their suffering, knowing they lived in the realm of God now and still to come. Now and not yet.

Obviously our own circumstances are a bit different today. Mark's audience was certain that the risen Christ would be right back. After two thousand years, we're here for the long haul. Maybe we've even moved on. No longer looking for signs and wonders. But that's the thing of it. The

⁴ Breuer, Sara Dylan: “First Sunday of Advent Year B.” *dylan's lectionary blog*. http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/11/first_sunday_of.html, November 21, 2005.

signs and wonders and the revelation of Christ are still there for us if we can stay alert and observant. If we can keep the eyes of our hearts open. As we discussed last week, the cosmic Christ is revealed every day in the faces of the needy, human and nonhuman, as well as in acts of kindness in response to those needs. It might not always feel like it, but God is ever at work behind the scenes, even in and among the most painful and destructive of circumstances. In our own country today we are battling monolithic economic and political forces. Poverty and homelessness on the one hand. Selfishness and greed on the other. Black Friday has morphed into Black Thanksgiving. As people are trampled and pepper sprayed in the name of the almighty bargain. And a Target employee who began work at 11 pm on Thursday lands her car in a canal because she is so exhausted after her shift ends. Where is God? We might ask with Mark's audience. Where is Christ? And then we might turn to the Occupy movements and, in particular, to the UC Davis students who responded peacefully to brutality at the hands of the police. We might turn to the Salvation Army bell ringers, to After 26, Project Christmas, and Shepherd's Table volunteers. To all the places good and justice are breaking through in our community and in our world. It's all there for us to see and appreciate, if we can take the time to look. That is, in part, what Advent is for.

So let us anticipate and prepare for Jesus' birth once again, but not only by shopping and wrapping and writing cards. Let us stay awake and alert to the signs of God's presence in our midst, already and on the horizon, knowing that not only that God empathizes with us, feels our individual and collective pain, but that the hope God offers in Christ has and will transcend even our worst nightmares.

May we be prepared and wide awake to receive that precious bundle with joy. Amen.