

**A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,  
Oak Park, IL on the Fifth Sunday in Lent  
March 13, 2016 by the Rev. Holly Ann Burt**

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

*I am about to do a new thing...do you not perceive it?*

*Isaiah 43:19*

I'm constantly amazed at the references to an apocalypse in our world today. Whether it a book, or a movie or television, I see zombies and asteroid collisions, world wars and plagues, alien invasions, all with the goal of destroying our planet. Even politicians warn that voting for the other candidate will bring the end of the world - or at least of the United States. Yet, there is some truth to all this fiction. An apocalypse can come at any time.

Sometimes you know exactly when the apocalypse will occur. You know the date when your world will change forever, when life as you know it will end. It can be a joyful change. How many will admit that the birth of your son or daughter was, indeed, an apocalypse? Everything you knew disappeared and your world changed in ways you did not and could not expect.

Yet, too often the apocalypse is a painful and wrenching experience. The unexpected end of a job or relationship. The loss of a dear friend or a loved one. An ending that truly is - or perhaps was - an apocalypse. For some of you, it's coming. The apocalypse is coming and you know it. You may or may not have a date. But it's in the near future. And for others, you can name that moment in the recent past when everything changed.

For Jesus, in today's reading from John, the apocalypse lay six days in the future. His life would end. For those he loved, for his disciples, it would be the end of everything they knew - or thought they knew. It is in this context that we read our Gospel story.

Jesus and the disciples have returned to Jerusalem, to Bethany, to the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Before Passover, before facing those who had threatened their lives, the disciples would relax and share a meal together.

Of course, in every gospel story the disciples disparage her gift and John names Judas as their spokesperson. What was the goal of these protesters? To take the focus from a woman who dared to honor and touch their teacher? Was it the apparent waste of good resources that could have been used for others? Or themselves? No matter.

With the apocalypse so very close, Jesus dismisses the argument. With the end of his life at hand and the world the disciples knew about to change, he says: You will have

opportunities to spend money in service to others. For right now, in this moment, I cherish the gift Mary has given me.

Endings and beginnings are part of our world. We travel through the Christian seasons from Advent and Lent, through Easter, Pentecost, to Christ the King and back, to remind us of the journeys we experience. Good Friday, the day the world changed, echoes down the centuries and finds resonance in our lives.

In our reading today, Jesus shows us the first way to face and survive the time of apocalypse in our life. We should choose to welcome the support of those who offer themselves to us. We may believe they cannot understand, and perhaps they cannot, but their gift of support and care we can acknowledge and accept. Their offering, if we allow it, can bring comfort.

And if there are those who would give doubt or disdain for us or those who care, like Jesus, we can simply set brush it aside and focus instead on the ointment offered for our wounds and grief.

To those of you who see the pain in others, freely offering the gift of Mary, of anointing in the best way you can, rejoice. It does not matter whether they will accept or reject your words or presence. It is the gift that is important.

Second, know that while the apocalypse may be the end of life as we currently know it, it is not the end.

From this morning's readings, Isaiah and the Psalmist were writing to a people that had experienced their own apocalypse. The land of Israel had been invaded. Families were torn from their homes and forced to travel hundreds of miles, to live as refugees in Babylonia while shattered groups of survivors remained behind in a conquered and devastated land. Yet the words we read are ones of hope.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like the watercourses of the Negev.  
Let who have sowed with tears,  
reap with songs of joy.

Those battered people held to the promise that the one who loved them, who sustained them through their apocalypse. They believed the God who said:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

This morning we even have Paul sharing the experience of his apocalypse with the Philippian church. He says: I had everything. Circumcision, I was an Israelite, a

Hebrew, a Pharisee, blameless under the law.” Then, in one moment, one apocalypse, none of that was important.

Paul concludes with the same hope as the Psalmist: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Like with Israel, with Paul, and with Jesus, so it is with us, the promise of our God is that a way will be made. The emptiness of the desert will be filled and our tears will be wiped away.

Oh how hard it can be to cling to these promises when the apocalypse lies only days in our future or moments in our past.

Jesus spent those final days teaching and final nights in prayer.  
The end came. The apocalypse.  
The beginning came. Easter.  
Joy, resurrection, the hope of newness. And do it will be for us.

As you and I face the endings in our lives, the moments that truly feel like our own apocalypse, remember how Jesus accepted the gift of Mary and accept, for yourself, the gifts of support and love others may offer. Let go of those who cannot or will not understand. Hold tight to the promise that there will be a resurrection, that there is a way, that song of joy will wipe away all tears.

Thanks be to God.