

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 13, 2022

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## Apocalypse Now

[Readings](#)

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are you ready for some talk about the end of the world, the apocalypse? Perhaps that seems overwhelming given the various crises our planet and species are facing right now. But whether we're ready or not, the Revised Common Lectionary is going to throw a lot of end-of-the-world scriptures at us over the next month or so! We're approaching the end of Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary, and as we approach the end of our year focusing on Luke we find that the readings are more and more future-oriented. While we will have a quick break next Sunday for Christ the King Sunday, we'll go right back to waiting for the second coming when we get to Advent the week after next. So buckle up, we'll be talking apocalypse for while!

Our Gospel reading today is part of a larger discourse about the chaos of the end times that consumes most of chapter 21. But I think that the talk of apocalypse actually starts in the end of chapter 20. That whole business about the scribes which leads into the story of the Widow's Mite, I would argue, is when the teaching regarding the apocalypse actually starts. So, a quick summary of that: The last three verses of chapter 20 are a condemnation of the hypocrisy of the scribes who like to be seen and respected as important and honorable men.<sup>1</sup> Then chapter 21 begins with Jesus comparing the offerings of rich people and a poor widow; this comparison lifts up the lowly and humble widow as the better example of faithful (and generous) living.<sup>2</sup> Then we arrive at our reading today about the destruction of the Temple and the chaos of apocalypse.

While our reading may be an obvious fit for the apocalyptic category, you may be wondering how I see apocalypse in the aforementioned verses that precede our text. I make that claim mainly because of what the word

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<sup>1</sup> [Luke 20:45-47](#) (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> [Luke 21:1-4](#) (NRSV)

“apocalypse” actually means! You see, it doesn’t necessarily mean the future end of the world or the second coming of Christ. I consider these precursor verses apocalyptic because they reveal something about what the next life, the next creation, the next reality is like. And that’s the root of the word “apocalypse,” unveiling or revealing.<sup>3</sup>

Or to put it another way, Jesus invites us to look deeper at the world around us. We are not called to a shallow or surface level way of interacting with the world. Rather, the Way of Christ means expending the time and energy to really see what God is up to in the world. The Way of Christ also means living our lives in such a way that our inner selves and our outer selves match. If this sound like yet another invitation to mirror-work, you’re right, it is!

Jesus critiques the hypocrisy of the scribes who are all surface and no authenticity when it comes to faith. Jesus rails (repeatedly) against the rich and powerful for their inability to center love, grace, and generosity in their lives of faith. Both of these criticisms have to do with outer versus inner. Then the widow comes along and humbly gives out of a true spirit of generosity. A spirit that responds to the needs she sees in the world around her. She doesn’t have much, but she gives what she can because the needs of her neighbors are revealed to her.

After these two teachings Jesus’ audience proves that they weren’t listening very well by commenting on the beauty of the Temple. And it surely was beautiful! It would have been, hands down, the greatest edifice most of the people of Israel had ever seen. It was big, made of huge stones and columns. It was beautiful, King Herod spent a fortune on adorning it with gold and costly treasures. No wonder the people there were filled with awe at the sight of it!

But it was all surface, the grandiose structure, the shiny vessels and rich tapestries were all lipstick on a pig to use a more modern phrase. It was all pretty and shiny, but it hid a corrupt and broken system. A system that chewed up widows and orphans. A system far more concerned with protecting itself than with living out the faith it was supposed to exemplify. A system that was oriented towards ostentation rather than substance. If this sounds familiar, it should. We see this propensity still at work today with

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<sup>3</sup> ἀποκάλυψις, meaning an unveiling, uncovering, revealing, revelation. Strong, J. (2010). The new Strong's expanded exhaustive concordance of the Bible (Red letter ed.). Thomas Nelson.

churches of all sorts more focused on appearance than actually walking the Way of Christ.

Jesus is having none of it. And so he unveils the hypocrisy. He reveals how things are broken and how we are not living as we were created to live. This beautiful Temple that impresses so many, he indicates, will not last. Such hypocrisy will always collapse. Such surface level faith cannot endure much scrutiny or challenge.

He then goes on to warn his would-be followers of the danger of this unveiling. The true danger of apocalypse: our systems of power and control do not like to be challenged. They do not like to be unveiled for the broken and corrupt things that they are. And they will fight to maintain power and control. They will fight to continue to center self-centeredness, greed, consumption, violence, self-righteous judgement, exclusion, oppression, and injustice. In the end that's what happened to Jesus for his apocalypse, for his unveiling of how things are not how they were made to be. Ultimately he was killed by the systems he unveiled and thereby threatened.

When we participate in apocalypse, when we seek to unveil the world around us, when we do the work of going beneath the surface level, there are consequences. Doing this work, following the Way, means that people will betray us, even hate us. In response to the unveiling, to the apocalypse, nation turns against nation, there are wars and famines and plagues. But it is only after these things are unveiled that God can begin the work of redeeming them. It is only after we go deeper into the world around us that God can use us to change things. Once we see how God is at work, we can join in that work too.

This requires the authenticity that I mentioned earlier. The authenticity of the widow whose internal values matched her external actions. This requires apocalypse too. We need to unveil ourselves before God and allow ourselves to be seen, truly seen. Well, of course God **already** sees us, but it's vitally important that we acknowledge that seeing. Part of following the Way of Christ means being laid bare before God and before ourselves. Mirror-work is all about seeing and being seen.

Richard Rohr sums this up beautifully in his devotional book, "Just This," in which he writes: "Much of the early work of contemplation is discovering a way to observe yourself from a compassionate and nonjudgmental distance until you can eventually live more and more of your life from this calm

inner awareness and acceptance. You will find yourself smiling, sighing, and weeping at yourself, much more than needing either to hate or to congratulate yourself—because you are finally looking at yourself with the eyes of God. Actually, what is happening is you are letting God gaze at you, in the way only God can gaze—with infinite mercy, love, and compassion which initiates a positive gaze, now going in both directions. Wow!”<sup>4</sup>

We need apocalypse and we need it now. We need to be unveiled before God’s gracious and loving gaze. We also need the world around us to be unveiled to that gracious and loving gaze. All of this so we can finally be who we were truly made to be. All of this in order to maybe, just maybe, join in God’s creative and redeeming work in the world around us so that others too can be who God made them to be. So that all of creation can be what God made it to be...good. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Rohr, Richard. (2017). Just This: Prompts and Practices for Contemplation. CAC Publishing