

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and pray the gathering prayer below.

LEADER: All-embracing God, you hold us in being.

ALL: We find you around us, within us, and between us.

LEADER: You are a God of here and now as well as there and then.

ALL: We find you around us, within us, and between us.

LEADER: We look for signs of your presence in our lives.

ALL: In the events of our lives and the happenings in our history.

LEADER: We come to hear your Word and wrestle with its meaning for us today.

ALL: We live in your Spirit, who will not let us go.

Communication brings constant threat into our living rooms. Weather extremes make climate change very believable. We plant earlier in spring and sweat more in hotter summers. Rains come in downpours that flood rivers and homes. The lava flows in Hawaii

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

make beautiful film footage as long as one’s house isn’t in the way. We remember the hurricanes by name.

Sunday’s gospel refers to natural disasters as trials that we suffer, not signs the world is about to end. Mark’s gospel refers to wars, earthquakes, and famines as “birth pangs,” the labor of learning to love one another and create a community of peace on earth (13.8).

Like us the people for whom Mark wrote the first gospel knew threat and loss. Jewish freedom fighters revolted against the Roman Empire in A.D. 66. Near the end of the four-year war, the Roman Tenth Legion lay siege to Jerusalem. The soldiers surrounded the city for months to starve the citizens into surrender. When the Romans finally attacked, they destroyed

the temple completely, leaving not a stone upon a stone.

In destroying the temple, the Romans ended the ancient Jewish religion, its traditions of animal sacrifice. The synagogue took its place. Today only the temple’s Western Wall survives, the holiest of sites for Jews, where many daily gather to pray.

Some scholars think Mark wrote the first gospel for Christians who fled Jerusalem when war broke out. Others think Mark wrote for the Christian community in Rome, whom the emperor Nero blamed for the fire that burned half the city in A.D. 65. In either case, Mark 13, from which we read Sunday’s gospel, assumes an audience that needs courage to face devastation and persecution.

● What worries you most these days?



GOSPEL



The end is in God's hands.

NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to his disciples about the coming of the Son of Man.

JESUS 1: In those days after trials of every kind, the sun will grow dark.

JESUS 2: The moon will have no light.

JESUS 3: The stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

JESUS 4: Then people will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will dispatch his messengers and gather his chosen ones from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of the earth and sky.

JESUS 1: Learn a lesson from the fig tree.

JESUS 2: When the sap begins to run into its branches and the tree begins to break into leaf,

JESUS 3: then you will know summer is near.

JESUS 4: In the same way, when you see these things happening, you will know the Son of Man is near, even at the door.

JESUS 1: I assure you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

JESUS 2: The heavens and the earth will pass away, but my words will not.

JESUS 3: About the day or hour when these things will happen, no one knows.

JESUS 4: Neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, only the Father.

Mark 13.24-32

Mark places the whole of the apocalyptic discourse in the mouth of Jesus as he sits on the Mount of Olives across the valley from the temple. His disciples Peter, James, John, and Andrew are with him and ask when the end will come and what the signs will be that it is coming.

Sunday's gospel contains two answers to the question of when Jesus will come again. One answer is very soon, in this generation, and the second is no one knows.

Some early Christians think Jesus will come again in their lifetimes; they insist Jesus promised, "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (13.30).

Others insist Jesus himself did not know when the end would come. They speak the final words of Sunday's gospel, "As to the day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father" (13.32).

● **When do you think Jesus will come again?**

● **What events have most changed your life?**

Why is the gospel ambiguous about when the world will end? To answer that question we have to understand what a gospel is and is not. A gospel is not a news report of Jesus' words and activities such as we expect today. No one videoed Jesus teaching in the temple courtyard.

People passed on Jesus' teaching orally for 40 years

In whom can we hope?

We contemporary Christians bring our own measure of worry as we become the audience of Mark 13. Nuclear arms. Climate change. AK15s, 47s. Opioids. Fake news. Hate news. The safety of those we love. War and ruin.

Mark 13 is often called the "little apocalypse." The word *apocalypse* means *revealing what is hidden*. Apocalyptic writing, an ancient cousin to contemporary science fiction, became popular in the centuries when the Greeks conquered, occupied, and sometimes persecuted the Jews. As a conquered people, the Jews lacked political power.

Apocalyptic perceives the world locked in a cataclysmic struggle between the forces of good and evil. This kind of literature creates secret symbols and codes and visionary journeys into other worlds. It aims to express the hopes and faith of the powerless that good will ultimately prevail over evil.

In A.D. 70 Mark wrote the first gospel for Christians unsure of what was coming to birth, unsure of themselves, of what was good and evil, unsure of Jesus. Mark wrote to call them to faith in Jesus' risen presence and the power of the Spirit in them, even in the worst of times.

before Mark wrote it down. As people told Jesus' teachings and stories about Jesus, they not only passed on what Jesus said, they also used the stories to interpret current events in their lives and to answer questions he hadn't answered.

Mark is writing in the wake of a cataclysmic event that demands interpretation—the destruction of the temple, which happened about 40 years after Jesus' death. It coincided with Jesus' eyewitness disciples reaching old age and with the deaths of Peter and Paul, martyred in the mid 60s. We can speculate that people who thought the end would come in their lifetimes saw signs converging in A.D. 70.

Mark recognizes a second early Christian voice in his apocalyptic chapter. This voice says only God knows when the end will come. All Christians should expect the end will be a positive experience. Jesus will come again in glory.

● **What compares in your experience to Israel's loss of the temple and its religion?**

The signs of chaos Mark describes surround us—global warming, extinct plants and animals, persistent drought, oceans that teem with plastic. Hope for our future as a society and a planet can seem myopic.

However, Jesus also gives us a positive image of sap rising in the fig tree and green leaves bursting forth. Indeed we live in chaos, but what is chaos except a sign of something new emerging? What if the future is not scary, but full of hope, every day a new creation?



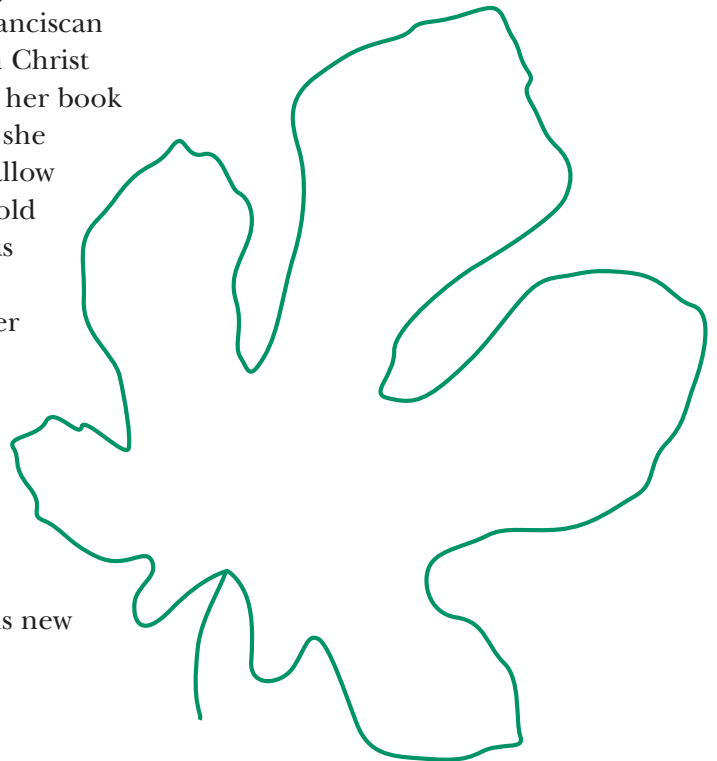
The Western Wall on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the only remaining wall of the Second Temple.

What signs of hope do we see? Write on the fig leaf a sign of hope you have seen today. Perhaps it is a teen who is volunteering and finding his or her passion to serve. Maybe it's the person who always, always recycles and reuses. Or a friend who knows how to listen. These are all signs of the new world Jesus promises that love can build. It is here now, just as he is. We are working together on it.

Ilia Delio is a Franciscan sister who writes on Christ and cosmology. In her book *The Emergent Christ*, she encourages us to “allow the Spirit to take hold of us and liberate us from fear, anxiety, and desire for power and control. Then we can seek and find the living among the dead. We can live in the risen Christ who empowers us to participate in this new creation” (148).

God the Spirit will wake us up from our closed, perhaps mediocre, lives. The Spirit lures us into openness to new life, lures us into finding hope.

- **What sign of hope do you want to be for others?**
- **What hope do others tell you they catch from you?**
- **What has come to birth for you out of change and seeming chaos?**



Does God care for the martyred just?

Apocalyptic writing flourished in the two centuries before Jesus' birth. Under Alexander the Great, the Greeks conquered the then-known world. Previous conquerors allowed the Jews to worship their own God, but the Greeks wanted their culture established throughout the middle-eastern world.

The Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 B.C.) openly persecuted Jews faithful to laws such as not eating pork. See his proclamation in 1 Maccabees 1.44-50. When he desecrated the Temple with a statue of Zeus (167-66 B.C.), the Maccabean revolt broke out. An anonymous author wrote the book of Daniel to give faithful Jews hope of God's vindication and strength in the face of persecution.

Sunday's first reading answers a theological problem which Antiochus's persecution raised: what was the fate of the just and innocent Jews martyred for keeping God's law? The vision in Daniel 12.1-3 translates Israel's belief in

God the Creator into belief that this same Creator can awaken the dead. This passage is a radical vision of resurrection from the second century before Jesus.

Fittingly, Christians often use this passage at funerals. Its imagery testifies to confident faith that the just pass into the care of God at death.

We will rise again.

At that time there shall arise Michael, the great prince, guardian of your people; it shall be a time unsurpassed in distress since nations began. At that time your people will escape; everyone who is found written in the book.

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever; others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace.

But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever.

Daniel 12.1-3

- What hope does this passage offer you?
- What impact have the cycle B scripture readings from Mark had on you this past year?

PRAY

Take some silent time to think about today's gospel and your responses to the reflections of the group.

LEADER: Jesus, you became one of us to reveal all we humans can be.

ALL: Let us never lose sight of the power of love to give birth to peace, justice, and human community.

LEADER: Let us envision and empower with faith situations about which we feel powerless.

Add prayers in a Prayer of the Faithful format. Respond:

ALL: Keep us safe in your love.

LEADER: God, you are our beginning and end. You are creative and dynamic, the hope of the hopeless and power of the powerless.

ALL: Keep us safe in your love.

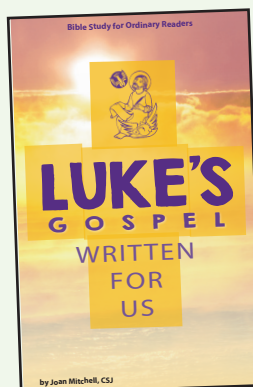


DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Follow the journeys refugees make in migration around the world in "Seeking Refuge," in-depth stories of their experiences. Go to nconline.org, click on Global Sisters Report, and scroll to find Migration.



We begin reading from Luke's gospel this Advent. Sister Joan's book explores Luke's unique perspective on Jesus for homilists, faith-sharing and bible study groups, and all us "friends of God". Go to goodgroundpress.com to read the Table of Contents and a sample chapter.