

Nov 13: After Things Fall Apart

Mal 4:1-2; Psa 98; 2 Thes 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

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One of my favorite parts of studying the Bible is holding in my hands an entire library reflecting the inspiration and experience of several human lifetimes. Early Israelite monarchy, the era of the prophets, the patriarchal narratives, post-exilic works, the gospels and epistles all reflect different sensibilities and unfolding understandings about who God is and how God wants to interact with humans. The richness of Scripture, inspired over hundreds and hundreds of years, is comparable to the richness of a long friendship or romantic relationship. A brief engagement, no matter how passionate, will never have the shared history, deep engagement, wisdom gained from ups and downs that a longer relationship contains. The Bible tells of times of triumph: the exodus, the enthronement of [relatively] good kings, Jesus' incarnation and resurrection. And the Bible also tells of times of woe: the destruction and exile of the northern and southern kingdoms, and the persecution and executions of Jesus and many of his early followers. The lectionary this week invites us to focus on what happens during and after times when things fall apart, and how God is always there, and remains with God's people.

Malachi is one of my favorites of the prophetic books because of the didactic relationship between God and God's people. The context of the book is that God has restored Jewish exiles to the promised land after the Babylonian exile. God words through the messenger ["Malachi" is probably best understood

as a role i.e., “my messenger” as in 3:1, rather than a proper name] announced that God is fed up with the ingratitude and laxness of the recently restored community. The people, and especially the leaders, were cutting corners and failing to live up to religious, educational, communal and economic commitments – basically practicing injustice toward God and neighbors. The call of Malachi is to get serious, to understand that God has punished the people before, and will do so again if they continue their slide toward indifference to loving God and neighbor.

But instead of exiling the whole people, God promises to differentiate among the righteous and unrighteous. The evildoers will be like burnt chaff, without a root or branches, without a past or a future (Mal 4:1). But for those who fear God’s name, the sun of righteousness will rise upon them with healing in its wings (Mal 4:2). After a terrible calamity, God brought the people back together. As the memory of past suffering, and crucially, the reason for the past suffering, began to fade, God reminded the people that what they did – and did not do – mattered. Even after things fell apart, God still saw the people, cared about them, and wanted them to live in right relationship with God and with each other.

Jesus made much the same argument, warning of tragedy to come. Two kinds of persecution were coming for Jesus’ early followers. As the gulf between Jesus’ Jewish followers and those who did not see Jesus as the promised messiah grew, Jesus’ followers would be mistreated and pushed out of their communities (Luke 21:12). Much more cataclysmic than this, however, the brutal Romans engaged in several wars against Jews in different parts of the empire; destroyed the temple; renamed Jerusalem and Judea; and slaughtered and enslaved tens of

thousands of Jews (Luke 21:6-11). Just as, hundreds of years before, the righteous prophets had fallen victim to violent co-religionists and foreigners alike, Jesus promised that his followers would be victims of attempts at religious purification and the ruthlessness of the forces of empire.

But in this persecution, just as things were falling apart, Jesus told his followers not to worry. Jesus would provide his followers opportunities to give their testimonies (Luke 21:14). More than that, Jesus would provide eloquence and wisdom during interrogations that would confound the examiners (Luke 21:15). As the civilization of Jesus' followers was crumbling from within and without because of baseless hatred, Jesus told his followers that God still cared what they did and what they said, and that Jesus would be with them. Even if they were killed – and most of Jesus' earliest followers were murdered, it seems – not a hair on their head would perish, because of the hope of the resurrection. God does not abandon God's people: not during war, persecution, death or anything else.

In the lectionary for this week, things have fallen apart. Countries have been invaded or are just about to be. Ideas about who God is and what God wants are debated, with violent disagreements springing up and religious communities fracturing. This may sound familiar to many readers. The good news is that God was, is and will be present; God sees what is happening; and God never wavers from standing beside those who fear God's name.