

OK, here we go again. We now know that the end of the world is going to happen on December 31, 2012. If you Google “2012,” you'll get 2,120,000 results. And that doesn't even include references to *2012*, the movie that opened this week. You may have seen trailers for it; it's about the end of the world as predicted by the ancient Mayan calendar. I haven't seen it, don't expect that I will. Scenes of collapsing buildings, flaming, crashing cars, and screaming people don't really appeal to me. There are enough disasters in real life; I don't need to pay \$10 to see it in a movie. But what is interesting about it is how it combines apocalyptic expectations (apocalyptic being about the end of the world) with ecological disaster and ancient indigenous wisdom.

If someone made a movie based on Mark 13: 1-8, it would require the same kind of special effects as *2012*. Mark 13: 1-8 is often called the “little apocalypse” because it reflects the beliefs of some in Mark's day of a time of great tribulation before the second coming of Christ: wars, earthquakes, famines, buildings toppled – no crashing flaming cars, but I'm sure they could be included in the update. In other words, a disaster movie like you've never seen before. The letter to the Hebrews also reflects this belief: “let us always think how to provoke one another to love and good deeds . . . and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

The ironic thing about apocalyptic writing is that it is supposed to instill, not fear, but hope. In *2012*, the hope is that a small group of A-list movie stars will survive and somehow carry on with life on earth. In Mark and Hebrews, the hope is that God will finally come and clean up the mess we've made of it, that good will triumph over evil. John Dominic Crossan calls it the “Great Divine Clean-Up of the Earth.” Although his claim is it's already begun, not coming soon, after an apocalyptic disaster movie, but already here. It's what Jesus was always on about, the realm of God, that is right here, right now.

But if that is true, if Jesus has already ushered in the “Great Divine Clean-Up,” then why are there still so many bad things happening? Wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines. We've even created new evils that Jesus never imagined: nuclear weapons, international terrorism, global warming. The words attributed to Jesus by Mark ring eerily in our minds after 9/11: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” And after the 2008 financial crisis, with the collapse of Lehman Brothers and other institutions deemed “too big to fail.” I suspect that many people would look askance at the idea of a Divine Clean-Up of the Earth being underway.

Even in our own “little apocalypses” - those end time disaster movies that appear for an extended run: the collapse of a marriage, the end of a job, the destruction of a dream, all kinds of things that make us cry out for God to come down here right now and make this all better. What kind of hope can we get out of these scary apocalyptic scenes?

In Mark, there's a sentence that I never paid much attention to before; it got lost in the disaster movie predictions. Jesus says, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” And on that sentence, the picture turns like one of those optical illusions that looks like one thing one way, but all of a sudden an entirely different picture appears. When we focus so much on the scary imagery, we miss what's really being said: something is being born; something new is coming into being. It turns our minds away from death towards birth. A wise person once said: *“If all the attention and concern which in Christian history have been given to last things had only been given to first things, the power of Christianity in the world and its service to the world would have been enormously increased.”*

We are fast approaching the season of Advent and Christmas, which is all about birth. Hannah, when she learns of her pregnancy, sings a song of hope and victory. We do have to put some of the triumphalistic language into context; it's the language of an oppressed people longing for deliverance. Just as it was for Mary when she sang the Magnificat, which Hannah's song foreshadows.

*God has shown strength with Gods arm; and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

This is about the birth of new hope and new life – first things. But it isn't naïve hope. “Birth pangs” is a common biblical metaphor for suffering that leads to something new. It has a realistic view of things, yet doesn't fall into despair. So we don't go to one extreme of seeing the world through rose colored glasses – or to the other of seeing the realities of violence, injustice and environmental disaster and just throw up our hands in resignation. Or to put it another way, we don't ignore our human need to think about end times (whether by human or divine hand), but we also do not obsess about how and when.

Hannah is our example of how to live in hope. According to the story, Hannah lived for a long time with depression. For a woman of her day, being childless was “the end,” was a kind of death. Her husband was clueless, and to make it worse, she had to share him with another wife who taunted Hannah with her fertility. One night, in deep distress, Hannah rose.

I wrote in *Keeping in Touch* about a sermon by James Forbes, 1 in which he recommends the name Hannah Rose as a wonderful name for a baby girl. Because in that rising, Hannah took her depression, her distress, her broken heart to God. And a strange thing happened. The priest thought she was drunk, but when she explained that she was pouring out her soul to God, he said, “Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant you your petition.” And then she left. Nothing happened right away. No miraculous solution appeared before her eyes. But somehow Hannah was changed. She was calm. She had new courage to face her detractors, new hope that somehow everything was going to be alright. And it was. Eventually she conceived and gave birth to Samuel.

Now there's a whole lot in that story that's problematic, and we don't want to get hung up on the specifics of polygamy, the role of women, the perceived stigma of childlessness, bargaining with God, making a deal to give her child up as an ascetic priest (I wonder what Samuel thought about that). What we do want to take from it is that Hannah rose. James Forbes: “Now let me say to you that the reason I offer the name of Hannah Rose is that that name has a profound religious meaning to me now. For the word Hannah spells the same way both ways and seems to suggest that when heaven's agendas and needs and agendas of humanity are brought together, no matter how depressing, there is a rising situation. It is also true that when anyone of us, in our brokenness, and barrenness, and unfruitfulness, will offer ourselves to Almighty God that God finds a way to lift us and to give us a chance to rise. It happened for Jesus the Christ — as I see Him on the cross, I think of HANNAH — Heaven's Agendas and Needs and the Needs and Agendas of Humanity are brought together. Even though they put Him into the tomb, He had to rise, for whenever these two are brought together there's a rising situation. I say to you, brothers and sisters, when I have been down and have offered my brokenness to God, God has lifted me. It is my hope that this very day, for those of you who know brokenness, unfruitfulness, misunderstanding, that you will offer it all to God and let God give you an uplift of spirit and a new outlook on life. Hannah rose, you ought to rise, too.”

Apocalyptic forecasts still intrigue us. Our own “little apocalypses” threaten to overwhelm us. But even with the possibility of global destruction on the horizon, Mark counsels us to “not be alarmed.” This is a challenge because many of us fear what the future will bring and see ourselves helpless in the face of forces beyond our control. However, the gospel affirms that we can trust that God is with us, energizing us and calling us to life-saving and planetary-transforming action in our own perilous time. We are part of the “Great Divine Clean-Up,” in which our actions shape the future of the planet and our own futures. We are not alone in our efforts.

“When life seems to be coming apart at the seams (as the scenes Jesus describes) it helps to remember that our time of trial and great suffering is like the crest of wave. It will not last forever. God is forever birthing new life out of suffering and will sweep up the wreckage to create new life. This is a hope that is confident but not naïve.” 2

When, like Hannah, we rise to pour out our hearts, to lay it all out to God, and let go of trying to figure out all of the details of how it's going to work out, we are free to await the birth of each new day and each new possibility. Martin Luther: "If I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today."

At this time of the church year, our attention is on last things. Even at the beginning of Advent, the focus of the readings is still on the Second Coming of Christ. But the words of Jesus should ring clearly throughout: "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." There is new life on the way. First things first.

Amen

1 The Rev. Dr. James Alexander Forbes, Jr. is Senior Minister Emeritus of The Riverside Church (NYC) and President of the Healing of the Nations Foundation. "Hannah Rose" can be heard at [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/forbes\\_3206.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/forbes_3206.htm)

2 Patricia Farmer is a contributing editor to *Creative Transformation: exploring the growing edge of religious life*.

Quote is from *Commentary*, <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearB/1999-2000/2000-11-19.shtml>