

There are two quite different ways of looking at this week's Gospel. One is that terrible things are going to happen and we should be prepared lest we be trapped; and the second is that actually terrible things happening means that redemption and God's reign are very near and we should be hopefully expectant.

Looking at this textually, the ambiguity seems to come from the fact that we are reading Luke's gospel. Both Luke and Matthew took Mark's gospel and used it pretty much word for word while adding additional material of their own. But Mark and Luke were writing at different times for different audiences, so Luke had to edit Mark's words to fit the situation in his faith community at the time. This is of course something we do all the time when we ask what relevance a passage has for us today, or what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us through it.

Mark was writing at the time when the Romans had put down an uprising and purposefully sacked Jerusalem and desecrated the temple. So Mark emphasized the disaster. There will be signs and portents and when you see these things happening, run! Stay alert so you will know to get out! He uses Jesus' teaching and interprets it as a prophecy about the destruction of the Jewish world.

But by the time Luke was writing, things had moved on. The destruction of the temple had happened a while back and probably wasn't such a big deal for Luke's readers who were mainly Gentiles. How are *his* readers to relate to this teaching? So Luke changed the emphasis.

He put the focus on the beginning of the time of trial and on the expectancy that God will reach out to help. When you see the portents in the heavens and when people are scared because of the roaring of the ocean then look up, lift up your heads because you know that God is near. And Luke played with the verb tense in a way that isn't so easy to

express in English so that “The heaven and the earth will pass away, but my words will not at all pass away,” is much more definite than the timing of when all this will happen.

So we can see that the ambiguity in the text probably comes from Luke’s need to make an apocalyptic text relevant to a later predominantly Gentile community.

And now we get to think about how Luke’s text is relevant to us, an even later predominantly Gentile community.

These are not easy times for many reasons. The future of the planet is in jeopardy. Our grandchildren will live in a very different world from the one we enjoy. We can easily see ourselves in that first sentence, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

That’s the scary bit. But what does Luke tell us – not to run for the hills but to look up. He uses two verbs which both mean to look up, to raise our heads. I don’t know about you but sometimes I feel like a turtle – I want to draw my head into my shell and never read another news report. And Luke says no, don’t do that... instead look up! “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

And he goes on,” Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly.” This seems to be his main message – be ready and expectant. Don’t go unconscious with drugs, alcohol, binge watching and all the other mood altering things you can find to do. Don’t even let yourself be caught up with anxiety. Be ready, for the reign of God is coming. And it is especially close when everything

seems to be falling apart and it seems as though the whole of Creation is shaken.

This is an important message for us today. Don't get caught up with anxiety and the worries of the world. Don't kill your feelings with alcohol or shopping or whatever. Rather watch expectantly for what God is doing.

Wow!

That's quite a challenge isn't it? There are so many things to worry about, but we don't have to. We get to lift up our heads and look to see what God is doing. Rather than asking God to bless *our* activities we get to ask what *God* is already doing and how we can join in. We can then relax knowing that even though there is and will be suffering, God is in the midst of it.

It's especially a challenge when the new media are all about creating anxiety. Of course they are, it's what sells papers, it's what takes us back to the internet again and again. I was in England when the Camp Fire was raging. Every chance I got I was checking in and watching for more fire announcements. I was anxious and I wanted to know everything I could know as if somehow that would make it all more manageable.

Yet the good news is that we don't need to do that. In fact it can get in the way. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen but somehow God is still going to bring about the redemption of Creation. We don't get to sit around and pretend nothing is happening – no, we need to be alert. But neither do we need to be worried and panicked.

As the people of God, the royal priesthood, we get to be alert to what God is doing and listen for how we can participate. And that participation is likely to include both prayer and action.

This is the message of Advent: God is coming. God is coming and we are part of God's great work. I hesitate to use the word "plan" because I really don't think God has it all planned out – that would take away our free will. But God does have an intention and God's intention will be fulfilled. We don't need to worry about how she is going to do it – that's her problem not ours.

The reign of God is a place of joy and of love and holiness not of fear, of heaviness and worry. Let us remind one another this Advent to live in that reign –that place of joy, love, hope and peace – because Jesus is coming. And how do we know? Because just like the leaves on the trees which herald new life, we can see that there is a lot wrong here on Planet Earth. And maybe that's even a good thing, because our God is one who specializes in bringing light into darkness, in turning death and despair into resurrection and joy.

So when you feel like fainting "from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world... stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Praise be to God!