SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 1 (B)
November 29, 2026

[RCL] Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Mark 13:24-37

Apocalypse Now

During the last days of September 2024, Hurricane Helene struck the southeast United States like a sledgehammer. The epicenter of destruction was western North Carolina, where 107 people lost their lives and over 70,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. Some homes flooded—even to the gutters—and others were swept away in the torrents of overflowing rivers.

It was an Appalachian apocalypse of unprecedented scale. Cory Vaillancourt, a journalist at the *Smokey Mountain News* in Haywood, North Carolina, spent hours driving through the storm and its aftermath, writing down his observations. About the scale and the extent of the destruction, he wrote, "Every thousand years the mountains blink. They've seen worse…but not much."

When the sun rose over the devastation the next morning, he observed, "A boisterous rainbow, unashamed, [that] forgot its promise."

For anyone of Christian faith, seeing a rainbow—the sign God gave Noah to promise that God would never again flood and destroy the land and kill God's people and creatures—may have felt like adding insult to injury and a perversion of the natural order of things.

In today's Gospel reading, what scholars call the "little apocalypse" from Mark, Jesus prophesized that:

> the sun will be darkened,
> and the moon will not give its light,
> and the stars will be falling from heaven,
> and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. (Mark 24b-25)

In short, he prophesized that the celestial order itself will fall apart, marking a change from what *was* to what *will be*.

Mark's Gospel, the earliest of the four, was written shortly after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE. The synoptic Gospel writers of Mark, Matthew, and Luke all lived through—or immediately after—this significant blow to the Jewish people, and all three of their Gospels contain a passage that correlates to

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today's reading from Mark. Scholars debate whether Jesus was prophesying the destruction of the Temple or if the Synoptic writers shaped this "little apocalypse" to be about the Temple, following its destruction.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of ritual and religious life and community, as well as where God was considered to be closest to the Jewish people. Its destruction felt like the end of the world for many Jews.

Whether it was Jesus' prediction or the writers' insertion that the Temple would be destroyed doesn't matter as much as the promise that Jesus makes in the midst of the terror he describes. Jesus promises, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31).

Vallaincourt ended his account in *Islands in the Sky: A People's History of Hurricane Helene* with this observation: "'Foundation, gone.' 'Roof, gone.' 'Life, gone.' But not 'faith, gone.' That story won't be written, neither now nor next time."

For the people of western North Carolina, who saw the end of everything they had known rushing by in the devastating flood waters, faith was the last thing standing in the midst of this 21st century little apocalypse.

Apocalypse has two meanings. One is the "end of the world"—a meaning depicted in things like post-apocalyptic novels and zombie apocalypse movies. But the other meaning is more nuanced. Apocalypse can also translated from the Greek as "revelation." Apocalypse is also an unveiling.

The revelation of Jesus' words in Mark—the unveiling of the truth that Jesus' words, his Good News, will never pass away—is the spot of light in the darkness of suffering and cosmic upheaval.

In other first-hand accounts of Hurricane Helene, as in *Islands in the Sky*, there is Good News, shining like a beacon. Good news can be found in the moments where the darkness that Jesus portends is pierced by the actions of others, whether purposeful or inadvertent.

Allie and Jim Bourdy shared their story in *Islands in the Sky*, recounting the flood and their subsequent rescue by a neighbor on a kayak. They told this story about waiting for help:

> When we were on the roof…we saw a lot of things going down the river. And then all of a sudden, there was this armada of ducks. Like, so many rubber ducks. I would say close to a thousand. So all of a sudden, you're in this space of terror and survival mode…and then this comical scene happens. There are just so many ducks floating down the river…those ducks were just a bright light.

Of all things: A flotilla of rubber ducks! Sometimes, the Good News is what makes us laugh when we otherwise want to cry. The original owner of that armada of rubber ducks was likely a neighbor with a sizeable collection whose loss was transformed into humor and hope for others.

One last account from *Islands in the Sky* comes from Tera and Amy McIntosh, the married women who run Misfit Mountain animal rescue, serving the greater Ashville area. They recounted that, at first, looking out over their rescue:

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> the destruction felt endless, like we were never going to get caught up. But then…Volunteers! The volunteers who came to help made us feel hopeful. We had new faces and familiar faces who all showed up to help us rebuild. We created friendships through the devastation and felt we could count on our community, our village, to lift us back up. It was a ritual, a rite of passage, overcoming this dark together. We were all in this together.

Even when everyone had lost something—from power to pets to a place to live, neighbors showed up. The Greatest Commandment our faith gives us was followed to the letter.

Look to Michele and Michael Toberer, co-founders of Mountain Mule Packers, who immediately showed up to the hardest hit communities and loaded up their mule strings with life-saving supplies to reach people who were otherwise unreachable while the flood waters slowly fell. Their experience serving the communities of western North Carolina led to them expanding their volunteer work into a non-profit, Mission Mules, whose guiding principle is "Pack it up and follow the Lord." They now serve communities throughout the southeastern United States after disasters.

It can at times be hard to find the light. It can be hard to believe that the Good News of Jesus Christ is still good following a disaster that levels whole communities.

And of course, some of the apocalypses we face aren't natural, nor do they affect whole communities. Sometimes, our little apocalypses are individual or limited to a family. Sometimes, the devastation is not even visible to others, but still earth-shattering. Words like, "you have cancer," or "your loved one has just died" can hit just as hard as a hurricane, even when those around us can't see how the bottom has just dropped out of our world.

Even so, even in these apocalypses, the Good News persists. In small kindnesses, in a moment of humor, in community showing up and making clear that they're in the middle of the apocalypse with us.

And slowly but surely, disasters end. We recover. It can take months, or years, or decades, but they end. And no matter what passes away around us, Jesus' words of love and grace and power—and the way that people bring them to life—will never pass away. *Amen.*

The Rev. Rowan Larson *(they/them) is the Rector of St. James Parish in Bozeman, Montana. They are a graduate of Union Theological Seminary (NYC), and previously served at churches in Newton and Cambridge in the Diocese of Massachusetts. When Rev. Rowan is not at St. James, they can most likely be found at their barn with their dressage horse, Ramsey, a 17.1 hh Shire/Friesian cross. Rev. Rowan also enjoys reading, fiber arts, fly fishing, foraging, and hiking with their family.*

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