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Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time - Liturgical Year B

Today's Scripture, particularly the gospel, is a preacher's bad dream. Yet, as we wind down the last Sundays after Pentecost each year, here they are again! The gospels at this time of year are about the end of time. Now I know less about the end of time than I know about marine biology or how to fix a broken church furnace. Like most of us, I find the kind of images and language Jesus is using to be confusing and hard to understand.

Let's talk for a moment about the kind of language and imagery Jesus is using. Students of the Bible all tell us that this is "apocalyptic" language. The word, they tell us, is used to describe language about a final upheaval in all creation when God finally destroys evil. "Apocalyptic" language sounds scary. The sun grows dark, the moon goes into eclipse, the stars and meteors are showering the planet with terror.

Is this a literal description of what might happen at the end of the world? Readers of the Bible have argued and differed for centuries. Some preachers say yes. They identify the times Jesus describes with horrors like atomic wars. Others saw Jesus' words coming true on September 11, 2001. These preachers take Jesus' words literally and tell us that the AIDS epidemic, the violence in the Middle East, modern terrorism are all signs of the end.

With most Roman Catholic readers of the Bible (and lots of others as well), I part company with this literal interpretation. Jesus is using, I submit, symbols and images to put across a point. The message is not the falling of stars or the collapse of the sun. The message is about God, what God is doing now and about what God wants to do in the future.

Jesus' message today is summed up in a four-letter word. The word? Hope. That's one great feature of apocalyptic language. It's always language that urges us to hope.

Why? Because it paints the world as a scary, terrifying place. To be quite honest, life is at times scary and seems out of control. Violence and war seem spiraling out of control. Soldiers die in Iraq, and children die in Dorchester. The daily news paints a business world riddled with corruption and greed that threatens our investments, our pensions, our future. No one seems to be able to control healthcare costs, and more and more of the poorest among us are left exposed to sickness and all it entails. It is understandable that fear and grief are a large part of many people's reaction to life.

Jesus has a message for those who think the world is all about doom and destruction. He says, God is in charge. Even when the skies collapse around you, when the world terrifies you, when life overwhelms you, God is in charge.

That's a key message for people of faith. It's altogether easy to picture God in charge when the sun is shining and all is at peace. But when our lives and the world are in turmoil, "hope" can seem foolish. How to be hopeful in the face of tragedy and loss? How cling to hope when we wonder where God is in this messy moment of my life?

One writer put it this way. "Hope is a state of mind, not a (state) of the world." He goes on to note that real hope does not always look for joy or even for success. Real hope is the capacity to wish for good and for God even in the midst of the most negative situations.

Jesus' assurance is the ground of our hope. Heaven and earth may pass away. They will. They are not made to endure. But our hope is in something deeper. "My words will not pass away." My word of forgiveness, my word of mercy, my word of love. These are realities that last. These are the ground of hope.

You and I make our way here each Sunday to listen to the Word and celebrate the Eucharist. We do so when the sun is shining and when the sky is dark. We do it weekly in the face of loss and in the joy of triumph. This Eucharist and our presence are the signs of our hope.

Is the world, terror, violence the final word? Jesus gives a resounding no! He faced death, struggled with violence, and overcame them all. Jesus, his word, his death, his resurrection – there is the ground of our hope.

Some of you may have read Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. It was the basis of a movie a year or so ago. In one of the books, Aragorn, the hero is speaking to a frightened young lad. The boy has found himself outfitted as a soldier for the coming battle of Helms Deep. The boy tells Aragorn that all the others are saying the battle is a sure disaster. There is no hope of success. Aragorn turns to the boy and replies, "There is always hope."

Jesus says the same to you and me today. "There is always hope," and he is the reason.