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## Introduction

It almost feels like the last three weeks of the liturgical year are preparing congregations for the drama of Advent. Taken together, the Sunday gospels for the next seven weeks rise high pantomime of expectation: floods and earthquakes and storms, oh my!

We hear tales of wars and tidings; of false prophets and lying certainties; of the powerful and the powerless. And it is all leading us towards the culmination of the Christian drama: God incarnate in the body of a small child, born into a family that knew displacement, indignity and despotism.

For congregations that celebrate the Eucharist on these Sundays, the liturgy, too, is an enactment of this same drama: the rising dystopian tone of the gospel texts is counterpointed with the intimacy, physicality and vulnerability of the Eucharist.

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## Text

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.

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It seems that the writer of the gospel of Mark is writing to an audience that have known many new voices that claim messianic status. Josephus records some of these figures, and Mark seems to have anxiety about them too, recording these words of Jesus almost as a warning for the future followers of Jesus in the early years of the Christian way.

The writer of Mark's gospel seems to feel compelled to state definitely the Messianic nature of Jesus in light of Pretenders. The phrase "in my name" is used only five other times apart from here in this gospel (9:37, 38, 39, 41; 13:13) and seems, for Mark, the true name to honour Jesus, rather than 'Jesus', 'Lord' or 'Son of Man' So here we see Jesus at ease with the narratives that will eventually befall Jerusalem (perhaps events that were occurring during the time of the composition of this gospel text). This is, for Mark, an indication of Jesus' identity as the true Messiah.

There is so much conflict at the heart of this text. The conflict between Mark — who considers Jesus to be the true Messiah — and those pretenders, and their followers.

And then there is clearly conflict in Mark about the future: on the one hand, Mark understands that Messianic pretenders will deceive their followers about the future. The future is unknown, part of this text seems to say. And yet, Mark has Jesus understand the future. The future is only known by the one who says we cannot know the future.

The signs that Mark's Jesus speaks about are calamitous indeed, and much apocalyptic — even dystopian — theologies have flowed from reading the signs of the times. For a while, the EEC was the beast with many heads, and then it wasn't. For another while a particular country was the image of Babylon, and then it wasn't. It seems that some of the primal anxieties of humanity are caught between the knowledge that we cannot know, and the primal desire to have some kind of jurisdiction over the future.

And so which is it? Can we tell the future by following the real Messiah or are we destined for a future that is unfolding and uncertain?

At this point it is helpful to realise that this Sunday's excerpt from the gospels is not meant to be finally sufficient in itself. It is part of the unfolding drama of the Christian calendar. It is raising up expectation about power and glory, about storms and mountains and loudness. Bang! And then it brings us to a point of shock: a small human, born of an unexpected mother. Birthpangs indeed. The reference of Jesus to birth in that line "there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs" can almost be lost amidst the cataclysmic nature of the other events. But here it is, a pang, a birth, a life created by another life, the human community continuing, supporting, reciprocal, vulnerable, in need of nurture and growth.

We sometimes expect Prophetic and Apocalyptic texts to tell the future, like some kind of sacred soothsaying. This desire for certainty draws on certain primal instincts in us. But the drama of the Christian year calls us — over and over, again and again — to the realisation that we cannot know the future, but we might be able to discern the present. The true apocalypse is that among us — over and over,

again and again — possibility is revealed in vulnerability.

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## Response

Where in your life — both in the past and now — have you been concerned with the the future?

What helped you in the midst of the uncertainties of the future during those times? Was it practices? Was it companionship? Was it art? Was it changing your mind? Was it service?

What was being born in those moments? Was it a surprise? Was it expected? How has it changed you?

Discuss together how faith might help us be present to the present, whatever it is, and whatever the future.

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## Prayer

God of all time,

You created days, nights,

mornings, evenings and dawns;

crawling things that crawled along

the bottom of the sea;

and then out of the sea;

and then onto hind legs;

and into us.

Unlike you, we are in time.

So we ask that we might see signs of you

in the here and now,

centering us, guiding us

towards what is most important

in the here and now

here and now.

Because we believe you are always being born

here

and now.

Amen.