

HOMILY—NOVEMBER 15, 2009 (33<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME)  
Dan 12:1-3; Ps 16:1, 5, 8, 9-10, 11; Heb 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32  
St. Philomena Parish, Detroit

Had my life this past week gone according to plan, I would have been in Rome last week attending a meeting of the Justice, Peace and Ecology Commission of the Capuchin Order. But as they sometimes do for all of us, things *didn't* go as planned and instead I spent the entire week in Detroit. I don't have anything against Detroit; but it's not Rome!

The reason for my cancelled trip was my passport or, more accurately, my *lack* of a passport. A week and a half earlier, I had sent it to a company that works with a Middle Eastern nation's consulate in order to get an entry visa to travel there in December. Despite assurances that the passport would be returned in time for my trip to Rome, it wasn't. The consequences were automatic: no passport, no international travel. Without a passport, you can't even get on the airplane, much less into the other country!

This is the time of our church year when our Scripture readings very intentionally ask us to check our passports—not the ones we use for international travel but rather the ones we will have to use for *eternal* travel. Over the next three Sundays the word of God will ask us, “Are you ready to make your final journey from this life to the next? Are you awake, watching, prepared?”

In the Bible, these questions are often asked through a particular genre of literature called *apocalyptic*. It comes from a Greek word that means “to uncover” or “to unveil.” While the best known (and most misunderstood) example of biblical apocalyptic literature is the Book of Revelation, today's readings include two other instances: one in the Book of Daniel and the other from Jesus the Gospel of Mark.

Apocalyptic literature uses future imagery to foster present hope. Its purpose is to encourage people who are suffering and oppressed to hang on and trust that the Lord will bring better days—but not before a time of severe testing. The Book of Daniel and Gospel of Mark were both written in such times for the people of Israel and the early church.

Though set in the time of the Exile to Babylon (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) the Book of Daniel was likely written four centuries later, during the reign of the cruel and despotic Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who sought to impose Greek customs and language on the people of Israel and to force them to abandon the faith of Abraham and the law of Moses. Many went along but others resisted, even to the point of death.

Today's passage from Daniel 12 describes “a time of unsurpassed distress” and judgment in which “the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament.” It's important to stop here and understand the *biblical* definition of wisdom. It's not the result of study or worldly intelligence. Indeed, as St. Paul reminds us so eloquently in 1 Corinthians 3:19, “the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God.”

Biblical wisdom has a much different starting point. Psalm 111:10 puts it simply: “*The fear of the Lord* is the beginning of wisdom; prudent are all who live by it.” This understanding of wisdom most developed in the Book of Proverbs. In the first chapter we are reminded that, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge....” (1:7).

This “fear” isn't so much an emotion as an attitude; and it is not so much a call to avoid getting on God's bad side as it is an invitation to draw near to the Lord in a spirit of

loving reverence and a sense of awe for who God is and what God does in our lives. According to Proverbs, it is *this* kind of fear that prolongs life (10:27); is a fountain of life (14:27); is training for still more wisdom (15:33); and helps us to avoid evil (16:6).

It is this same kind of fear that Jesus tries to instill in his disciples in today's gospel passage. Nearing the end of his mission on earth and seeing the cross on the horizon, Jesus echoes the prophet Daniel in evoking a time of cataclysm and testing. The people who heard this gospel for the first time were experiencing their own time of tribulation at the hands of the Romans—a time in which the Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed just as it had been by the Babylonians six centuries earlier.

Jesus urges his disciples to be attentive to the signs around them and to be prepared for the Son of Man's return: "when you see these things happening," he says, "know that he is near, at the gates." What were the "things" to which Jesus referred? In addition to the heavenly signs in today's gospel reading, Mark 13 is filled with many others: the destruction of the temple (vv. 1-3); false prophets and messiahs, "wars and rumors of wars," along with earthquakes (vv. 4-8, 21-22); persecutions (vv. 9-13); and worst of all, the "great abomination," i.e. the presence of pagan idols within the temple itself!

Many of these same signs are with us today; and that's exactly the point: because none of us, "neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son" know "that day or hour," our task as disciples of Jesus is *to be transformed and get ready now* and make sure that we have our passports, issued by his grace, to eternity.

A man was caught in a fire that left his face so horribly disfigured that few people could look at him. Sensing their revulsion and rejection, over time he developed a personality that paralleled his face, much like Harvey Dent becoming Two-Face in the last *Batman* movie. He became paranoid, critical, sarcastic, and mean. Naturally, people were even more repelled by him, and so began a descent to deeper bitterness and isolation.

One day a friend took him to an artist in the neighboring town who made incredibly lifelike masks. Within a few hours the man returned home with a new, handsome face. People couldn't recognize him and began to treat him differently. Over time, his own outlook on life and people began to change, too. He was pleasant, encouraging, and helpful. He even got his first date in years, with one of the prettiest women in town. One date led to another, and they soon fell in love and decided to marry.

On the eve of their wedding, however, the man became overwrought with guilt and fear. He decided that he needed to tell his fiancé the truth. So he went to her house and said, "We've got to talk." She let him in and they sat down in the parlor.

"I'm not really the person I seem," he confessed. "I'm wearing a mask and don't look anything like this."

She assured him that she didn't love him for his looks and asked him to take off his mask. He did; but she said quizzically, "I thought you said you were wearing a mask?"

The man rushed to a mirror...and found that the once-scarred features of his face had molded themselves into the handsome figure of the mask.

That's the kind of apocalypse or unveiling that the Lord invites us to embrace:  
a shaking up of our hearts and minds that, with his help,  
will lead to a new heavens and a new earth. +