

When it comes to “End times” texts, there seem to be two dominant points of view these days. One is to take them quite seriously, and even create fantasies out of them, such as the popular “Left Behind” series. I recently heard someone tell the story of his neighbor, a Christian fundamentalist, who came over one day and asked him if in-case-of-the-rapture, he would take care of her cat. The other position on “End Times” texts, perhaps held by a majority of mainline Protestants, is to breeze past them as quickly as possible to get back to something more comfortable, like the Beatitudes or the story of the Prodigal Son. More often than not, I find I belong to the latter group. And, when the apocalyptic talk belongs to Jesus, I become more uncomfortable, and I want to move on.

Surely we’ve all had times when a topic a friend or partner or spouse has brought up has made us uncomfortable; a time when we say, either to ourselves or out-loud, “Next topic!” Well, something I know about that feeling is that when I feel that way, when something makes me uncomfortable, that is actually NOT the time to move on; rather, it is the time to pay attention. Those moments in life when we feel the most uncomfortable are the times that for our own personal and spiritual growth, we need to ask – why?

In today’s passage, the disciples are like children on their first trip to Disneyland. They look around in awe of all the fantastic structures; impressed by what man can make; structures so fantastic, it’s hard to remember that they, like anything else made by human hands, are temporary. One day, the paint will fade, the metal will rust, and the stone will erode.

Knowing that his disciples are still impressed by “big things” – be they temples, or big structures, or big important people – Jesus gives them a serious warning, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he’ and they will lead many astray.”

It could be easy for many of us to dismiss this passage as having nothing to do with us. We walk into big cities and big houses and it’s just another day in America. Big cities big meals, big vacations, – these are commonplace to us. But, what if literal buildings are not all that Jesus is talking about. What if for the disciples it may be temples and high priests that impress them and take their focus away from what is true and important, but for us there is something else we’ve built up? Or something else that has come to us saying, “I am he.”

It is likely that each of us has fallen prey to one, or more, of these imposters. Often this imposter cheerfully announces, “God wants you happy, right? Well I make you happy. Therefore I am God! I am he!” What this passage is telling us, however, is that sometimes walking with God takes us directly into what we like to flee from: the uncomfortable.

When I was in my early twenties, I led a very comfortable life. As an employee at a major Hollywood studio, my days were full of “big” meetings with “big” people, and for once, there were some “big”ger bills in my wallet.

In the few hours I could squeeze out of my “big”, busy life, I volunteered at a church-sponsored drop-in center for homeless youth.

One evening I was at the drop-in center when a young homeless teenager whom I hadn’t seen for quite a while came in. “Joey! Long time no see! How ya doin’?” He looked me straight in the eyes, rolled up his sleeve and showed me the needle marks on his arm and said, “How does it look like I’m doing?” Joey had gotten caught up in a bad scene and I felt powerless to do anything but listen.

We talked for quite some time that evening, Joey telling me his story, and him asking me mine. When he found out that I worked for Disney, he said to me straight faced, “You can do something to help us. You can do something to keep this place open all the time.” Clearly Joey had a picture of me as someone who could flip open her rolodex and call in Tom Hanks for a sizable donation to the center. This was NOT a realistic picture, but in that moment, a seed had been planted. It was an uncomfortable seed, but it grew... Perhaps I couldn’t get a famous person to make a sizable donation to the center, but perhaps I could make this sort of work more of my life, and ultimately I did, leaving my comfortable studio job for a position with a children’s charity. My life was provoked to change by the words of a homeless, drug-addicted, teenager.

In our Epistle today, Paul makes a decisive and easily overlooked statement about what church is. He writes ²³*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.* ²⁴*And let us consider how **to provoke one another to love and good deeds,*** ²⁵*not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.*

I needed Joey to provoke me to love and good deeds. This homeless youth drop-in center was “church” in the truest sense of the word.

When all of us gather here, we have already fulfilled one of Paul’s exhortations: we have gathered together. This is not always easy, I know. As a society that no longer observes a full Sabbath day of rest, Sunday is intruded upon by lots of other demands – and perhaps some of those other gods who promise to make us happy: a baseball game, a cup of coffee and the NYT, catching up on work, sleeping in... whatever it is.

But you are here....

And sometimes – maybe not every Sunday or every month, we are provoked by someone to love more fully, to care for someone we would not have thought to, to step into a space of discomfort, leaving behind for a moment all that is quite comfortable. Someone here, somehow, may do what we cannot do for ourselves: nudge us a bit, away from the imposter gods we have befriended, and closer to the true God, who seems to delight in moving us out of our comfort zones, where we can move around more freely, and in so doing, rediscover – again and again – that happiness is not found by sidestepping discomfort; sometimes, it is found by being provoked right into it.

Joey never learned what influence he had in my life. Likewise, sometimes, we are the ones doing the provoking, and we don’t even know it. It’s part of the mystery, I think, of being a church community. Something special happens here, even when we are not totally aware of it.

In the past few weeks, we have heard from members of the congregation about what this community means to them and how their lives have been transformed through being a part of it. In a few minutes, we will exchange the peace, and bring forward the pledge cards that are signs of the commitment that so many have made to this church community. Ultimately they are signs that we all realize something special happens here, that we know you need it, and that this community is one we want to see endure, that this community is the one in which we have been, and want to continue to be, provoked.

The world indeed is full of “big” things and imposter gods, who say to us, “I am he.” Today, in a special way, as we bring our pledge cards up, we say to each other, *He is here*, among us.