

Sunday, November 16, 2014: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Are our days of destruction the "day of the Lord"?

by [Martha Moore-Keish](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue

For our 15th anniversary, my husband Chris and I cashed in our frequent flyer miles and traveled to Greece. On the fourth day, we drove into the surreal landscape of Meteora, with its sheer rocky towers rising from the valley floor. Soon we began to see what we had come for: old hermitages nestled in caves high in the cliffs, followed by tile-roofed monasteries impossibly perched atop stone pillars. Since the ninth century, Christian monks have come here to dedicate themselves to solitude and prayer in the austere loneliness of rocks and wind.

We had anticipated the landscape, and we came looking for the monasteries. We had even anticipated—sort of—the treacherous paths to the six monasteries currently open to visitors, though crossing a narrow swinging bridge hundreds of feet above the valley floor required some deep breathing from me and some deep patience from Chris.

What we did not expect were the vivid interiors that greeted us. When we entered the narthex of the tiny church at Ayios Nikolaos Anapaphsas, we immediately confronted a wall of frescoes showing the final judgment in fearsome detail: Christ in the top center, with those on his right going to glory and those on his left roasting in a river of fire or being devoured by sharp-toothed fish. We could hardly take our eyes from those tortured bodies, even as we passed through the door into the radiant sanctuary.

At each monastery we visited, the pattern was the same: at the church's entrance, a confrontation with gruesome death and destruction. Why should these scenes be the last thing you see before worship? A monk at the monastery of Varlaam explained that the frescoes are intended to provoke humility and self-reflection, so that the monks will continually pray to be on the right hand of Christ with the righteous, rather than burning in torment.

Perhaps, I thought. But isn't that a bit self-serving, praying for one's own safety while others suffer horrific torment? Doesn't a prayer for one's own righteousness too easily become confident *self*-righteousness?

Since our visit, I have come to see in my reaction a different form of self-righteousness. Who am I to judge the monks who pass in prayer day by day before the Day of Judgment, ever reminded that Christ is not only snuggly baby but also righteous Judge? Could my own reaction to the scenes of judgment betray a tendency to say in my heart, as the Zephaniah reading says, "The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm"?

The Meteora frescoes make it easy for outsiders to stand back and judge their theology as simplistic. Yet the "day of the Lord" depicted there deserves our attention, and both Zephaniah and Paul call us to such attention. The prophet names torments that are all too real—wrath, destruction, ruin and devastation, battle cries and the leveling of cities. And it's not like such descriptions sound false or far away. Such images are all too evident: in Iraq as I write this, in Syria for more than four years, in countless cities around the world wracked by the fiery destruction of war or the slow decay of endemic poverty. Days of torment and destruction greet us anew every morning.

The problem is instead this: it is not at all clear that our days of destruction are truly the day of the Lord. These look all too much like the exercise of human powers, rather than God's judgment upon these powers.

What then is the link between God's judgment and the destruction we see? On the one hand, with the eyes of faith we do glimpse God's judgment on unrighteousness when unholy regimes are overthrown: Pharaoh, the Roman Empire, National Socialism in Germany, legalized racial segregation in the American South, apartheid in South Africa. Our faith is built on the confidence that divine righteousness has broken into human history in the past, and that it will ultimately prevail over all oppressive systems generated by power-mad humanity. Surely we hope for the coming of the Lord to bring justice, to "trample out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored," knowing that such trampling is God's judgment on judgment, God's wrath against human wrath. Surely, too, with the increasing gap between rich and poor in our country today, we lean forward in hope at Zephaniah's word that "neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them."

Yet this hope can be hard to sustain. The day of the Lord may be promised, but the inbreaking of God's justice is hard to spot. As I mused on this problem, I stumbled on Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians: "You, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day."

We are already children of the day. The day of the Lord is not just past or future, but the day in which we already live—the one in which Jesus has already come to expose our persistent patterns of violence and to lead us in a new way of living that refuses to participate in such destruction.

Maybe those Meteora monks have something right after all. Maybe pondering those vivid scenes of the day of the Lord can lead not to self-righteousness but to confidence that God will destroy every death-dealing demonic force in the world. Maybe I've forgotten who sits at the top of the frescoes: Christ the Judge, whose body still bears the scars of his torture, and who yet lives and beckons us even now to the way of radiant life beyond the shadows.