

December 1, Advent 1C (Luke 21:25-36)

If our faith cannot help us escape tribulations, then what should we do when we face them?

by [Catherine Healy](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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It was a hot summer night, and I was dreaming of sirens. I startled awake, still hearing their peals. But as I sat up, I realized that the sirens were only getting louder.

Beside me, my wife was stumbling to her feet. “Those are tornado sirens,” she said. “We need to get the kids.”

Tornado? I thought as we dragged our two young children out of bed, hauled them into the windowless bathroom, and squeezed beside them into blanket nests on the floor. I had spent half my life in Chicago without ever hearing a tornado siren. I hadn’t even known that the city *had* tornado sirens. What was going on?

As it turned out, the night of my strange dream was only the first of several late-night tornado warnings last summer. It’s unclear whether this was an effect of climate change or just a fluke, but there’s no doubt that it followed several years of noticeable “global weirding”: hotter, stickier summers; later, milder winters; trees budding much too early or much too late. The nearby tornadoes felt like one more sign that something was seriously awry.

My children, ever resilient, adjusted to these nights of bathroom camping much better than I did. Every time, while my daughter slept and my son climbed around on the toilet tank, I would slump against the wall and think about the end of the world.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary offers us a glimpse of what gospels commentators call the “little apocalypse.” It may be a bit confusing, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, to hear a sermon preached by the adult Jesus just before the Last Supper. Yet this text, which has parallels in Matthew and Mark,

invites us to remember that the incarnation is the fulfillment of an end-times prophecy. It is addressed to the disciples and foretells the catastrophic events that will precede Jesus' return. Jesus warns them that their faith will not protect them from persecution or other suffering, and the most tangible changes will be environmental ones.

I am not a biblical literalist, yet the imagery in this passage gives me pause. As our planet gets hotter and tidal floods increase, aren't we already seeing "signs in the sun [and] the moon"? And as rising waters drive more and more climate refugees from their homelands, it's hard not to notice that "distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea" is already upon us.

Even if we don't assign eschatological significance to these crises, we are still left to wonder: If our faith cannot help us escape tribulations, then what, exactly, should we plan to do when we face them?

The context of this passage might help here. Jesus is speaking to his friends days before he enters into the apocalyptic period of his own life, in both senses of the word: his crucifixion is an apocalypse in the common sense—an end of days—and his resurrection draws more literally on the Greek term *apokálypsis*, an uncovering or revealing (as in the book of Revelation) that shows Jesus to be the Son of God who overcomes death, once and for all time. The apostles will witness unspeakable tragedy, but Jesus assures them that there is a redemptive arc to his suffering and theirs. The events of the passion story, awful as they are, ultimately uncover the fullness of God's love for humanity.

Further, the apostles are not called upon to be passive observers of these apocalyptic events. In the next chapter, as they gather around the table for the Last Supper, Jesus tells them: "The leader [among you must become] like one who serves" (Luke 22:26). This sentiment is matched in John's telling of the Last Supper story, during which Jesus issues his famous mandate: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34).

The message is clear: in times of crisis, we are called upon to humble ourselves so that we might better look out for the welfare of others. As Jesus' disciples in this generation, we are the ones who must turn calamities into revelations of God's love for the world—a love so powerfully expressed by Jesus toward his friends, and now expressed with the same power by our care for one another.

My five-year-old, understandably, got pretty anxious about tornadoes last summer. We calmed her nerves by brainstorming the things we would do if a real tornado came through: stay safe, share our water and flashlights, help any neighbors who need first aid.

The apocalyptic teachings of Jesus remind me that although I can't stop human suffering, I can control my response to it, with actions even a kindergartner can understand: care for others, share what you have, seek to help those who are most impacted when disaster strikes. In so doing, we can bring about our own local *apokálypsis*: a revealing, in our midst, of the goodness and mercy of God.