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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“By your perseverance you will secure your lives” (Luke 21:19).

The end of the liturgical year sets a somber tone with scripture readings and rites emphasizing how fragile human life is, accentuating hope in the midst of loss as darkness advances in the changing seasons across the northern hemisphere. My Catholic childhood in the 1950s holds vivid memories of attending funerals where

the casket was covered in a black pall and the choir sang the medieval sequence, *Dies irae, dies illa* ("Day of wrath, day of doom"). The loss of adult relatives was my introduction to wakes and funerals and the unfathomable mystery of death.

Today's reading from Malachi sounds this same note of loss, end times and judgment typical of the season. St. Paul encourages his missionary churches to endure uncertainty with faith, and St. Luke's Gospel applies the words of Jesus to a primitive church that had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and was experiencing resistance and persecution in the empire.

Apocalyptic themes pervade some Christian churches, and televangelists thrive on interpreting current events as presaging the end of the world. Part of Jesus' counsel to disciples in Luke is to remain calm and to ignore purveyors of doom. Perseverance will protect them, even in the midst of trials and suffering.

Luke's readers had had their world shaken by the catastrophe of the Jewish-Roman war and the diaspora of both Jews and Christians from Palestine. The modern equivalent of their shock might be the events of September 11, 2001, when Americans experienced an unthinkable, deadly attack on its people, its financial and government institutions.

For the early church, the long view of history would show that even great trauma had the result of thrusting the Gospel into the Gentile world as Paul's communities sprang up across Asia Minor, Greece and to Rome, the center of the ancient world. What appeared to be the end of the world ushered in a new world filled with fresh energy and promise.

No one who follows world events stoked by political turmoil and global upheaval today can escape the feeling that basic institutions, including the church, are being severely tested. Breakdown or breakthrough are at issue, and the depth of cultural shifts suggest that it will take more than a single generation to know the outcome of today's crises. The fate of the planet itself is now the backdrop for other more familiar concerns.

If the scriptures hold a central message for us it is that we are not passive observers but responsible agents in deciding our political, religious and ecological future. Jesus addresses us as strong witnesses to God's truth that only justice will bring peace and only an end to gross inequality and political corruption will save the planet and restore the common good.

Fear is useless and paralysis is a betrayal of our baptismal call to transform the world God made in the divine image and likeness. We do not lack past heroes who refused to shrink from overwhelming crises but applied their faith to the hard work of pushing back at violence and greed.

In the last century, a world between two global wars and plunging into economic depression was met head on by a young woman and the Catholic Worker movement she helped start in the slums of New York. "What we would like to do," said Dorothy Day, "is to change the world." This must also be our prayer and our call to action.

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