I imagine that many of us have people in our life we really like, except for that one thing that kind of drives us up the wall or makes us profoundly uncomfortable. Maybe a friend who is incredibly energetic and outgoing and fun but always runs not five, not ten, but thirty or more minutes late. Or a family member who is deeply thoughtful and wise, well-read and reflective, who cracks his knuckles in the loudest, most obnoxious way possible, completely oblivious to how uncomfortable this makes everyone around him. Or a creative colleague who is a good companion throughout the day but who actually believes in some pretty off the wall conspiracy theories - the kind that made you wonder when she first started talking about them if she was serious until you realized, with some alarm, that she was. Mostly these people are great – good friends, competent, thoughtful, wise – and we love being around them, just so long as we can steer conversation in the right direction or find ways to avoid those odd, unseemly attributes.

If we are honest about it, my guess is a lot of us relate to Jesus like this. He’s great – a brilliant wisdom teacher, an encouraging friend, a trusted confidant, a visionary prophet. But every once and a while he starts talking apocalypse – “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars … People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world” - and we simply don’t know what to make of him anymore. We check our phones, wondering if he’ll notice. We tune out, hoping he’ll pick up on the awkward silence. We cough a few times and suggest it’s time to get the check. Or, more likely, we look for ways to explain away this unfortunate tendency. Surely this is a relic of Jesus’ particular time, place and culture no longer relevant in our own, or, at the very least, an unimportant part of his overall teaching.

The problem, of course, is that Jesus’ apocalyptic tendencies can’t be so easily avoided. He was an apocalyptic teacher. His was an apocalyptic message. This can, and should, unsettle us, partially because of how apocalypse has come to be understood over the centuries but mostly because this is a deep and profound teaching, which means it has the power to move us, even the power to change us. Ultimately, as we have all surely learned from other relationships, no good ever comes of avoidance, at least not in the long run. If we want to be in relationship with Jesus,
we have to take him seriously – all of him – even and perhaps especially when he makes us crazy, or crazy uncomfortable.

Today’s reading comes late in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus and his friends have completed their long journey to Jerusalem. But if the disciples were hoping for some R&R they are quickly disappointed. Arriving in the holy place seems to have unhinged something in their teacher, who insists on talking about a coming period of destruction and desolation. His words are harsher, more urgent, as his time is running short and only he seems to know it. The very next verse following today’s reading begins the story of the passion, which will lead to Jesus’ arrest, conviction, and, ultimately, the cross. Scholars are quick to remind us that the city of Jerusalem was on the very edge of collapse in those days: the precarious balance of power between the occupying Roman Empire and the local Jewish elites already fraying along the seams, and a mere forty years later the temple would fall, and the world would never be the same.

It was a time of tremendous anxiety and uncertainty. A time of unrest and upset, which gave rise to many apocalyptic strains of Judaism. The tendency to look to an end of times is particularly strong when the current times become particularly unbearable. That much is easy to understand. But apocalypticism is not all gloom and doom. It contains within it, usually squirreled away under a lot of foreboding and fearsome fervor, a kernel of hope. Hope that things are going to change. That things are going to get better.

So Jesus stands at a precipice looking out, and he sees things that no one else can see: the end of his life and the beginning of a new one; the end of the known world and the beginning of a new one. And he tells people to read the signs around them: to attend to the cycles of nature and the heavenly bodies; to expect confusion in the face of such monumental shifts. The trouble only comes if we, like too many people before us, take any of this too literally.

A couple weeks ago, I was driving a car full of priests to a clergy event when the phone of the guy sitting in my front seat started making a strange, incessant sound. He took it out and silenced it, then announced that a series of magnitude 6 and 7 earthquakes were being reported in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. A priest in the backseat asked how he knew that just as the same strange sound went off again, which the owner of the phone once again silenced as he explained that he’d recently downloaded a disaster alert app and was realizing he would have to adjust the settings. He had set it to let him know of any particularly serious incidents happening within a certain radius of his home – tsunamis, tornadoes, mass shootings – and also to inform him of
large-scale disasters – Category 5 hurricanes, massive earthquakes, acts of war – anywhere in the world. The problem was that the thing just wouldn’t stop going off. The irony of the moment was not lost on us, students of Jesus that we are, as I drove slowly through the smoke and soot saturated air hovering around us from the Camp Fire.

It is so easy to hear Jesus’ apocalyptic teachings and think, “Is he talking about now? Are these the signs? The fires and the earthquakes and the famines? The caravans and the superstorms and the super moons? The collapse of the global diplomacy, the late rains, the floods?” But one of the things that annoying alarm reminded me of is that people in every time and place have had good reason to wonder the same. We have become acutely aware of all the tragedies of the world thanks to social media and the 24-hour news cycle, but someone, somewhere, has always been able to point to the heavens or the weather or the brokenness of their community and figure, “this must be what Jesus was talking about. There’s just no other explanation.”

The first time I ever preached during Advent was six years ago. I was in seminary but coming back to San Francisco for winter break, partially for an ordination interview and partially to meet my brand-new baby niece, and my sponsoring parish invited me to preach the third Sunday of Advent, which is called Gaudete Sunday, Gaudete meaning “rejoice” in Latin. I had only preached a handful of times at that point and worked for weeks on the sermon, carving out precious hours to amidst a grueling final exam schedule so that I could spend as much time as possible with Elena when I arrived home. I put the finishing touches on it in New Haven and considered it done, and then on Friday, December 14th, the Sandy Hook shooting happened in Newtown, and suddenly my joyful sermon didn’t seem quite so appropriate.

Now I’d love to tell you that the following Saturday was the only time I have ever had to rewrite a sermon in light of a terrible tragedy, but in only four years of priesthood this has happened too many times for me to count (seriously, I went through my files and tried but I gave up). People were sitting in Church in December in 2012 wondering, “Is he talking about now? Are these the signs?” And I think the complicated truth is that Jesus is talking about now – he is always talking about now – but not in the way we might think.

As Eric reminded us a couple weeks ago, apocalypse is a biblical genre – like poetry, letters, genealogy – which comes from the word for uncovering or unveiling. This means that apocalyptic teachings are meant to reveal something to us; something about ourselves and our
world; something that is not otherwise apparent. And just as it would be fruitless to read the poetry of scripture like a letter, or turn to the genealogies scattered about for the inspiration we find in Hopkins, one should never look to apocalyptic texts like we do a weather report or market forecast: as a straightforward prediction of the future. This is not because what Jesus is saying is untrue or unreliable. It is because to do so would be to miss the point, which is simply, incredibly, that things are already changing. That the Son of Man is coming – now, in 2012, tomorrow, always – and that the process that makes this happen is beyond our control, as far beyond our reach as the sun and moon and stars, as mysterious and delightful and irreducible as the turning of a fig tree in early summer.

For the last few weeks we’ve been watching a Great Course in our weekly Adult Forum about spirituality and the brain, and it has left me thinking about how we know anything about the world around us. It has left me particularly thinking about the limitations of our senses. Our senses are incredible. Stunningly complex. Infinitely fascinating. And the information they give us is good and helpful. But they are also limited. If we simply rely on our eyes to tell us about the world around us, we might walk through a Redwood Grove and think, “Those are some tall, strong trees, each and every one of them. Some pull yourself up by your bootstraps, independent, proud trees.” Only hidden just below the surface, if we dig just a little deeper, we’ll see that those strong, proud trees share deep, interconnected roots which allow each tree to grow so much taller and so much fuller than it ever could alone. And that’s still an example of something just barely hidden from view. Forget the trees that actually share physical roots. Think about all the information we now know plants are sharing with each other about diseases and bugs and other threats through chemical and electrical signals.

We can see and feel and taste and smell and hear a lot, but we can’t see and feel and taste and smell and hear all that makes up reality. We can’t see UV rays or Infrared, can’t hear the frequencies of a dog whistle, can’t smell every gas. Direct sensory experience is important but it is not enough to give the world meaning. In Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis writes about this conundrum as he reflects on the ocean. If we want to know about the ocean, we can go to the shore and feel the cool water on our toes, hear the roaring waves, smell the salty air. And no matter what people have told us about it the experience of those things will be indescribable, new, enlivening. So we can know for ourselves these good and helpful things about the ocean, but that knowledge won’t help us much if we then want to get into a boat and sail across that
ocean to another land. For that we need a great deal more information: information handed down to us by others in the form of maps, the knowledge it takes to build a boat and a compass or the wisdom to read the stars. If everyone had to experience each thing for the first time – if we couldn’t build on what knowledge we have gained and share it – we would be lost. Stuck.

This, he explains, is a bit like how we receive revelation: that knowledge given to us by Jesus, the Bible, the Church, which is deeply true and profoundly helpful but not knowable by other means such as personal experience. And that is the good news of Jesus’ insistent, unsettling, upsetting talk about the end, the coming disasters, the signs – that right here and right now, in every time and place, God is remaking the world, turning everything inside out, and that what we will discover on the other side of it all is a kingdom of love and light.

I said that revelation is intended to be not only good but helpful, like a map, and in the case of Jesus’ apocalypticism I find that especially true, because if he hadn’t told us that terrible things will happen but they will not have the last word, that natural disasters and political upheaval and all sorts of social strain are real and hard and heartbreaking but they are not more powerful than God, we might be tempted to despair in the face of this world’s brokenness. But as it is, with the things we are lucky enough to know, things Jesus alone could see and was kind enough to share with us, we can live in a world of hurt and remember that love is stronger than death, that the arc of history is long but it bends towards justice, and that, even when it is hidden from sight, God is reconciling all things into one. Even more than all of that we can know that God will be with us as we work to see that Kingdom come.

Look to the sun or the moon or the stars. Look to the fraying seams, the broken hearts, the empty places within and around. Look, and see the love, the longing, the loneliness, the loss, for they are real. But do not despair. The Son of Man is coming, and with him a whole new world. Amen.