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OLQP

Children are afraid of the dark. We try to comfort them. We place nightlights in their bedrooms, sometimes we even lay with them until they fall asleep. We reassure them that nothing will harm them because we, their parents and loved ones, are close by. And, they eventually rest. But still, children are afraid of the dark.

We adult children are afraid of darkness. But how do we get comfort, what are our nightlights, what do we do to ease the darkness of our lives so that we can live well and rest comfortably? Sometimes we adults try to end our darkness with more darkness, the poor choices and bad behaviors that Jesus remarks will only bring us deception.

Approaching the end of the Church's year next week, today we hear about images of the end of time. In theological language, we call these readings apocalyptic, a word that just means "unveiling." Years ago, there was a popular movie called the *Apocalypse Now*, a powerful movie with Marlon Brando and Robert Duvall and Martin Sheen set in the time of the Viet Nam era. To see the images of that movie and the themes in it, you really do think that the world is coming to an end. Interestingly, that movie is based on a novella about conflicts in the Congo by Joseph Conrad from 1902 called *Heart of Darkness*. I am wondering: Does the darkness of our lives and our worlds come from the events around us or our hearts inside of us? As we listen to these apocalyptic readings, what is God unveiling in our lives? For us Christians, the apocalypse is not so much about the end of the world; it is about the beginnings of a new way of being in the world that never ends. It is about the loving process of conversion.

Of all that Jesus says in this gospel today, I would like to take a look at three things that could help us move more deeply into the conversion experiences that we are called to. He says that "there will be powerful earthquakes, famines, and plagues from place to place." And there are right here in the middle of the darkness of our lives.

First, earthquakes. There is no doubt that the natural disasters of our time seem to be growing in number and power. Thursday's cyclone in Bangladesh killed more than 2000 people, we remember Katrina in our own country, the great Christmas tsunami just a few years ago. All of these call for our prayers, our coordinated charity to help relieve the suffering, and our attention to our disrespect for the environment that may hasten some of these events. Yet, aren't there earthquakes and tsunamis in our personal and social lives as well as the geologic? When someone we love dies, when a key relationship ends, when a rejection pierces us, when racism touches us, when our fears swallow us—aren't these things that shake us to the core? Don't they shift our way of thinking? Cause us to change our business-as-usual way of living? During this process of shifting and finding new, more stable ground on which to stand after an earthquake goes through our lives, do we seek the presence of Jesus? Are we open to a greater reliance on the gentle presence of Christ after the violent aftermath of our personal and social earthquakes? Do we let Jesus Christ rise up out of the crack in the earth-quaked ground beneath us?

Second, famines. It is no secret that we human people are starving to death. More than 800 million people go to bed hungry every night, most are women and children. 2 million babies will die every year from hunger. And, these statistics are just scratching the surface. Again, the grave injustice of hunger is calling forth our charitable response and our hearts of justice to change this evil. Yet, what about the famines we face daily? How many of us are starving to death for affection, attention, affirmation, acceptance, esteem, forgiveness, or peace? What's more, how many of us are feeding ourselves to death on the wrong things? We seek to feed our ego or our libido or our wealth, when it is our hearts and souls that continue to go hungry. Which of our appetites needs attention? As people who come to church to be fed on the bread and wine of life, do we seek to be fed by Jesus Christ in our daily lives? Is the virtue and grace of our gentle God sufficient for us to live in the world? If our bellies are full, then why do our hearts and souls growl with hunger pains?

Finally, plagues. We live in a world where sickness spreads like the air we breathe. In fact, it is a tragedy that so often even the air makes us sick. From HIV/AIDS to malaria and countless other diseases, our human race is ill. Yet, what do we do to attend to the illness of darkness that calls for both the light and the healing of Jesus Christ? The spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser once said that psychological problems call forth spiritual solutions. I think he may be right. Of course, we need to pay attention to the great human sciences, yet we are called to plunge into the depths of the sacred sciences also. How active are we to open ourselves to the life-giving conversations that can bring us healing and reconciliation? What part of our soul has been darkened by sin or trauma or isolation? As a Church who celebrates a sacrament of healing and reconciliation, do we pray for these graces and believe that they can be ours? What areas of our lives are crying for wholeness amid this broken Body of Christ?

Church, as we conclude this liturgical year, we see that we are being invited to unveil a stronger, richer, more whole way of living Jesus in our world. As God's grace lifts those things that are veiled in our lives, we will have less and less darkness. We will live in the light, and our deepening conversion into the life of Christ will bring us the hope to face the challenges of our lives. What's more, this grace will help to bring an end to our fear of the darkness, for we shall live with hearts of light.