

“Living (Really!) in Apocalyptic Times”

Sermon for Sunday, November 14th, 2010, by The Rev. Joe Summers

(Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25, 2nd Thessalonians 6-13, Luke 21:5-19)

I want to talk today about living during apocalyptic times, that is, times when it seems decreed that the world is coming to an end, at least the world as we know it. As near as I can tell, for at least the last 2,000 years, people have often felt that things like wars, famines, earthquakes, terrible diseases, were signs the world was coming to an end and of an approaching divine judgment. At the same time, one can see over that time how, in fact, there were at least a good number of times, when in many different cultures, the world as they knew as people knew it did come to an end: the collapse of various empires, plagues like the Black Plague or the combination of plagues that devastated the peoples of the Americas, the slave trade, the rise of totalitarian movements, the Holocaust. There always seems to be evidence that what we love may be destroyed, and yet there are times, such as the one we're living in now, when people have every reason to feel this in a special way. The way we and our children are anticipating global warming and devastation to the environment shapes our daily lives. Last week I mention how the Christian vision of the communion of the Saints helped transform what could be experienced simply as a devastating loss of connection and meaning into a source of comfort, connection, wisdom and strength. Today I want to focus on the degree to which how we approach living in apocalyptic times can transform such times from being times in which fear, shame and judgment destroy our souls and humanity, into times through which we gain our humanity, our souls, in gladness and joy.

Now first, I want to say a word about apocalyptic literature. According to Wikipedia:

“Apocalypse” (Αποκάλυψις) is a Greek word meaning “revelation”, “an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known, apart from the unveiling. As a genre, apocalyptic literature details the authors’ visions of the end times, as revealed by a heavenly messenger or Angel.”

It’s a genre of literature in Judaism and Christianity that dates from at least the Babylonian captivity, as seen in the book of Daniel, through to the birth of Christianity, as seen in the book of Revelations, through to the present as seen in books like the “Left Behind” series.

It’s a genre of literature that tends to say--you think things are bad now? Just wait, things are going to get so much worse, before they get better. But they will get better, because this is all part of a divine plan.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber hated this literature. He said that it embodied the the I-It worldview that is the opposite of the I-Thou vision of divine relationship. Apocalyptic visions see people as mere pawns of grand schemes and, in the process, they encourage us to view ourselves and others as objects of those schemes. As one who survived the holocaust, Buber

knew it was precisely in times when we were tempted to see things in apocalyptic terms that we needed to hold fast to the vision of dialogue, honor, mutuality, love, and faithfulness that is at the heart of I-Thou relationships.

At the heart of this issue of whether or not apocalyptic times make us into the image of the I-It world, or whether we are able to preserve our divine humanity, seems to have everything to do with how we live in relationship to time.

Writing about the holocaust, in her poem "Ourselves or Nothing", Carolyn Forché writes:

all things human take time,
time which the damned never have, time for life
to repair at least the worst of its wounds;
it took time to wake, time for horror
to incite revolt, time for the recovery
of lucidity and will....

Marge Piercy wrote the collection of poems entitled, "To be of Use", during a time in the late 1960's and early 1970's when many felt our country was on the verge of revolution. In the process, many ended up treating themselves and/or others as objects. Piercy, who was part of the radical movement of the time, addresses this issue in her poem "The Spring Offensive of the Snail", which she wrote in 1972 . It also addresses this issue of our relationship to time:

Living someplace else is wrong
in Jerusalem the golden
floating over New England smog,
above paper company forests,
deserted brick textile mills
square brooders on the rotten rivers,
developer-chewed mountains.

Living out of time is wrong.
The future drained us thin as paper.
We were tools scraping.
After the revolution
we would be good, love one another
and bake fruitcakes.
In the meantime eat your ulcer.

Living upside down is wrong,
roots in the air
mouths filled with sand.
Only what might be sang.
I cannot live crackling

with electric rage always.
The journey is too long
to run, cursing those
who can't keep up.
Give me your hand.
Talk quietly to everyone you meet.
It is going on.
We are moving again
with our houses on our backs.
This time we have to remember
to sing and make soup.
Pack the Kapital and the vitamin E,
the basil plant for the sill,
Apache tears you picked up in the desert.

But remember to bury
all old quarrels
behind the garage for compost.
Forgive who insulted you.
Forgive yourself for being wrong.
You will do it again
for nothing living
resembles a straight line,
certainly not this journey
to and fro, zigzagging
you there and me here
making our own road onward
as the snail does.

Yes, for some time we might contemplate
not the tiger, not the eagle or grizzly
but the snail who always remembers
that wherever you find yourself eating
is home, the center
where you must make your love,
and wherever you wake up
is here, the right place to be
where we start again.

This call to create a different relationship to time is a word we hear proclaimed again and again in response to such times:

*The psalms and their vision of living in the fullness of time, even in times of terror, when the arrows are flying by day and by night.

*The early desert fathers and mothers who, in the midst of the solitude and quiet of the desert, found a vision that laid a foundation for life after the Roman Empire.

*The monastic chants that developed in the early church and that are like the practice of joy and peace, overcoming fear and anxiety.

*Henry David Thoreau's manifesto *Walden*, written as he saw his world about to be overrun by industrial capitalism. At the heart of *Walden* you find this call into contemplation and I-Thou relationship.

*The various youth movements, from the beatniks to the hippies and the slackers--that have insisted on not keeping up with the competitive rat race.

*The renewal of the focus on contemplative practices within Christianity that have followed World War II.

*The powerful effect the call of Eastern religions to practice silence has been having on our culture.

* It is found in folk aphorisms. Satchel Page's advice "Avoid running at all times" and "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you," which reminds me that it's just when I'm feeling the need to go faster that I need to slow down.

or the power of Paul Reps Zen poem:

“Drinking
a bowl of green tea
I stopped the war”

If a major key to saving our humanity and our souls in apocalyptic times is practicing time fullness through the practice of silence and contemplation, another key has to do with honoring and treasuring the nuance of language. Apocalyptic times tell us that art is not important, literature is not important, nuance is not important. Having been sentenced to serve in the Gulag Archipelago, the hellish prison camps that the Soviet Government built on the islands off Siberia, the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky says that, in the midst of the black and white world of imprisonment and being a victim of political persecution, he was on the verge of losing his soul, until he discovered the poetry of W.H. Auden. It was by immersing himself in the poetry of Auden, a poet who on the surface seems so many light years away from the world of the archipelago, that he was able to regain his soul, through coming to appreciate again the language of nuance and particularity. Any of us who find ourselves in apocalyptic times, or doing battle with great evil, would do well to remember that challenge.

Now we come to our gospel and its surprising good news, which is found in the line “by your endurance you will gain your souls” through such times. First, I was struck by the line endurance--that doesn't sound too promising. It's not like saying that by your amazing faith or ecstatic visions or spiritual power you will overcome all. Endurance sounds much more like toughing it out. But then I was caught by the second part of the phrase, “you will gain your souls.” In others words--this isn't just a battle about survival, it's a struggle in which we gain something--soul --our souls. For Jesus, the day of judgment is not a day of terror and shame but a day of claiming ourselves and our joy and discovering our humanity.

So here we are, in an apocalyptic time, in a time where many are going around saying this is the end, this is the time of the final judgment, and Jesus says-- okay- this time is what it is, but it isn't about any kind of final judgment, and...you don't have to freak out, or arm yourself to the teeth, or become the smartest or richest person in the world. You don't have to let the fearfulness of this time define you; you can, instead, redeem this time by being a person who drinks from the springs of salvation, the holy spirit, the vulnerable spirit that works in and through radically imperfect human beings.

Ultimately, Jesus says, it is all about love. It is about the reign of love, here on earth. What better time to practice loving and being loved, than in the midst of the hardship and suffering of fearful times? It doesn't mean suffering and hardship and fearful times are good, but it does mean they don't have to keep us from knowing what it is to love and be loved.

But Jesus goes further than that. His message, Paul's message, Jeremiah's and Isaiah's message seems much closer to the REM song, “It's the end of the world as we know it ... and I feel fine.” For them times of destruction have in them the seeds of God's new creation, and they live in and out of that heavenly vision.

This winter I'm planning to read Karen Armstrong's book on the Axial age. My understanding is that this time in history, between 800 and 200 B.C., was a time that followed the widespread genocidal wars that came with the discovery of the new technology of the war horse. What's striking is that, after all this bloodshed found throughout so much of the world, we have this time in which:

- * Siddhartha Guatama, also known as the Buddha, appears and teaches in India,

- *Confucianism and Taoism emerge in China,

- *the Golden age of the philosophers, such as Socrates, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Thucydides, Archimedes, and Homer happens in Greece,

- *and the great prophets such as Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Deutero-Isaiah appear in Israel.

All of them bring a simple message-- this pursuit of wealth and power through war and domina-

tion is not what being human is about. They represent a collective breakthrough in the evolution of human thinking. They lay the groundwork for visions we are still seeking to understand and live into, like Isaiah's vision of the mighty and the lowly, being able to live together in peace and being unafraid.

I've lived through the twisted thinking of apocalyptic thought, both the political versions that emerged in the late 60's and the religious versions that emerged in the 70's. I know what it is to lose your soul in the midst of that kind of thinking. The charismatic renewal, which began as a wonderful spiritual renewal, ended up becoming a tool of that kind of superstitious fearful thinking. Ralph Martin was one of the founders and major international leaders of that renewal. The last time I had dinner with him, I was a sophomore in college, and he asked me what I was now doing--I said that I was majoring in English Literature. He smiled and laughed knowingly and said to the others gathered at the table that literature wasn't going to be of much use in the dark age we were entering into. Thankfully, by that time, I had become part of the Catholic Worker movement and, from it and from my medieval history class, I knew about the Irish Renaissance, so I was able to say to him, "actually, Ralph, in what has often been referred to as the dark ages, it was groups of Irish monks, men and women, who went around teaching agriculture, liturgy, and literature, who converted the Germanic tribes and laid the groundwork for a new world. And it had everything to do with their saving, preserving and treasuring books at a time when libraries around the world had been burned".

I don't think my response registered with him at all, but it helped me. The vision of the Irish Renaissance gave me a very practical plan for how to deal with the end of the world, if that's the way things went. And speaking of that kind of practical advice, I just want to point out that very practical way Paul suggests those, in the Thessalonian Church, deal with the apocalyptic Christians of his time. Some of them were apparently saying that, because Christ is coming soon, they weren't going to work and make a living. I suspect making a living was viewed as too earthly an activity. Paul says that, if they are unwilling to share in the collective offering through their labor, then they don't need to eat from the collective pot. I suspect he was giving them a chance to rethink their ideas about earthly life, because eating is as much an earthly activity as working. Unfortunately, it's a statement that later got used out of context to justify not helping the unemployed, but at the time, it was simply a very practical way of boldly rejecting those who were justifying doing nothing in the name of faith.

We, in this small community of Incarnation, can help hold the valuing of God, of I-thou relationship, of time, language, spirit, love, friendship, art, music, contemplation against the way fear can drive people, like a freight train. We can do it by practical love (that is love, not only in ideas, but practical actions), through contemplative prayer (prayer that expands time and makes it full again and helps us experience God), through celebrating the beauty of art and being artists, through standing up against oppression and violence and doing the political work which is the art of those who seek justice.

When others come to us speaking of this or that group as animals or monsters, let us remember

that's how they once spoke of the ancestors of the Swedes, the Danes, the Norwegians, the Germans, the Romans and almost every other people. People and cultures can and do change.

When people say to us, "this is the end of the world", let us remember that Jesus said, when people say that to us, that we need not to be distracted and instead be about what we are called to be about.

In fearful times, let us be people of faith like those small bands of Irish monks, who so appalled the Roman Church, because they rode on horses, men and women together, their long hair flying in the wind, wild in their joy, testifying that we did not have to live in fear of life and the world at the very time when the Roman Church was hiding behind fortresses.

In apocalyptic times let us be like our brother Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, even while in a concentration camp facing almost certain death, lived as if he had a future, let himself fall deeply in love, got engaged and, during that time, left us with a lasting vision of a new kind of faith, a new kind of church.

In the time of the beast, the time when everyone is given a number instead of a name, let us teach our children that no one can take from them their true name and that, even in the time of the beast, it is possible to live lives of great happiness, great fulfillment, as we let ourselves love a world--in such need of healing and transformation.

The good news is, who we are and how we live, are not totally dependent on what is happening in the world around us. It's a matter of choice. It's a matter of sight. It's a matter of practice.

And if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

