

Pentecost 23C (11/17/2019)

Malachi 4:1-2

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Apocalyptic imagery in the Bible gives vivid expression to the unease that pervades our common life. When things are falling apart from the personal to the global level, ancient visions of natural and human disaster may seem to speak of the end. But the purpose of apocalyptic prophecy is not to predict the end of the world, but to insist on the urgency of our efforts for the sake of God's reign of peace until it comes on Earth as in heaven.

"Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"

This is the question Ebenezer Scrooge asks the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in the decisive chapter of Charles' Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The miserly Scrooge receives a visit on Christmas Eve from the spirit of his former business partner who warns him to change his ways lest he be doomed to wander through eternity burdened by a great chain, the cumulative weight of his greed and callousness in life. Accompanied through the night by three more spirits on a visionary tour of his past, present, and future, Scrooge finally kneels at his own neglected grave, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come pointing down at it ominously. "Are these the shadows of the things that Will be," Scrooge asks the spirit, "or are they shadows of things that May be, only? ...Hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"¹ Of course, Scrooge is not past all hope. His

¹ As cited by Barbara Rossing in *The Rapture Exposed*, 83.

visionary journey is a wake-up call to the life that he still has a chance to live, a life of generosity and goodwill.

In this way, *A Christmas Carol* is akin to the visionary passages in the Bible we call apocalypse. In its most basic sense, the word *apocalypse* means revelation or uncovering. The most famous passages in the apocalyptic genre are found in the books of Daniel and Revelation, although Jesus also makes use of apocalyptic imagery in teachings like the one we hear in our Gospel from Luke today. **Wars, earthquakes, plagues, and heavenly portents are classic elements of Jewish and Christian apocalypse, symbols of the tumult and confusion that mark every era of human history.** “These things must take place,” Jesus insists, “but the end will not follow immediately.”

Self-proclaimed prophets of the end times tend to neglect that last phrase. For many, the temptation to read apocalyptic scripture as a blueprint for the future is too strong to resist, and someone is always ready with a new timetable for the end of the world. That end is usually envisioned in terms of sudden rapture for a favored few and cataclysmic destruction for the rest. But, why a vision of such devastation in the first place? If God has set the world on a collision course with disaster, then what hope remains? *Why show us this, if we are past all hope?*

I suspect that the urge to uncover a divine plan amid the disorder has something to do with our desire for control. If only we can map out the details of the plan in advance, we can mitigate our anxiety. *Violence and disaster are*

frightening, the logic goes, but these are only signs of God's impending judgment.

Remain faithful, and you'll escape it.

But, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not escapism. God so loves the world – this world – that God becomes one with us here.² The promise is not that God will pluck some from the fire while allowing others to burn, but that God will renew the whole world in mercy and love in order to realize God's dream for us: “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them; [and] they will be God's peoples... God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”³ That's the great vision of the end, according to Revelation, in spite of the fearful events described in symbolic terms in that book and others.

Still, if the apocalypse, the unveiling of God's purpose, is ultimately hopeful, then what are we to make of Jesus' reference to armed conflict and natural disaster and disease and persecution? What does it mean that “these things must take place”?

Jesus acknowledges that life in the interim is vulnerable, subject to suffering. And, the question of suffering is the perennial question of faith. The notion that a benevolent God would allow for, even ordain, terror and pain and grief has turned more than a few away from the faith.

² John 3:16-17.

³ Revelation 21:3-4.

But, the God of the manger and the cross is not removed from suffering, standing at a safe distance as we creatures groan in anticipation of our redemption.⁴ Emmanuel is God with us in every aspect of our life, to include terror and pain and grief.

Richard Rohr puts it this way:

Once I know that all suffering is *both our suffering and God's suffering*, I can better endure the desolations and disappointments that come my way. I can live with fewer comforts and conveniences when I see my part in global warming. I can speak with a soft and trusting voice in the public domain if doing so will help lessen human hatred and mistrust. I can stop circling the wagons around my own group, if doing so will help us recognize our common humanity.

If I can recognize that all suffering and crucifixion (divine, planetary, human, animal) is "one body" and will one day be transmuted into the "one body" of cosmic resurrection (Philippians 3:21), I can at least live without going crazy or being permanently depressed.⁵

And, even as each one of us carries a share of the load, by grace we can also heed the call to bear the burdens of others.

Dear church, apocalyptic imagery in the Bible gives vivid expression to the unease that pervades our common life. When things are falling apart from the personal to the global level, ancient visions of natural and human disaster may seem to speak of the end. But, the purpose of apocalyptic prophecy is not to predict the end of the world, but to insist on the urgency of our efforts for the sake of God's reign of peace until it comes on Earth as in heaven.

⁴ Romans 8:18-23.

⁵ *The Universal Christ*, 167.