

SERMON, August 13, 2023, First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield

Title: "The End" Dan Crump

Apocalypse Now. Global powers rattling their nuclear sabers. Hottest summer in recorded history. Storms and heat waves measured not in degrees but in how many tens of millions are affected. Covid devastating our supply chains, and eroding trust in one another from scientific expertise to faith in our elections. AI poised to supercharge the already critical concentrations of knowledge, power, privilege, and wealth. Fear abounds, and hope seems self-destructively linked to the defeat of those who do not share our facts, but certainly share our fate.

I never thought I would say this, but reality is starting to make the Book of Revelation sound like a JK Rowling novel. "Harry Potter and ... the ... Mark of the Beast." I've got my own tortured past with this crazy book having come of age during the "Late Great Planet Earth" era. I remember coming home to an empty house and wondering if I'd been "left behind?"

Our main line denominations would like to keep Revelation locked in the attic. Protestant church fathers Luther and Zwingli said it should not be in the Bible. It's the only NT text that Calvin did not write a commentary on. And if you cite this crazy uncle of a text, you risk sounding like the crazy uncle. Well. I'm an uncle and maybe I'm crazy. What have I got to lose? Here is a brief overview followed by the second scripture of the day:

1. A letter written to seven churches begins with an introduction followed by specific greetings and admonitions to each church.
2. The vision begins with the throne of God and a scroll with seven seals that can only be opened by the Lamb.
3. The first four seals bring the four horsemen bearing violence, injustice and plagues. The seventh brings on the trumpets. Each trumpet blast heralds a new ecological devastation. One third of all trees are burned. One third of sea life dies. The fresh water is poisoned.
4. Then, "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a wreath of twelve stars on her head" is crying out "in the agony of giving birth." A fiery, red dragon appears, ready to devour the infant as it emerges, but the child is snatched away to heaven while the woman flees to the wilderness. The dragon pursues the woman, but she is rescued by the earth.
5. The dragon is joined by a seven headed sea beast and a two horned land beast. They force all humankind to worship an idol and bear the mark: 666.
6. The earth is then reaped and trampled like grapes. The blood overflows. Seven bowls of rage are poured out one by one. The ocean turns to the blood of a corpse. The sun scorches people with fierce heat.
7. The judgment of the great whore of Babylon is next. The seven headed beast she rode in on and the kings of the earth turn on her, strip her and devour her. The global merchants weep and mourn for her since there is no longer a market for their luxurious cargo, which includes slaves — human lives.
8. There is a great celebration for the destruction of Babylon followed by the "marriage feast for the Lamb."
9. A heavenly army defeats the beast and the kings, and kills all their armies. Birds feast on the flesh.
10. The book of life is opened and all whose names do not appear are cast into the lake of fire.

Finally, the second scripture reading for today, Revelation 21:1-5:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he 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.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for the word of God among us. **Thanks be to God.**

Some Bibles title this book the Apocalypse of John after the Greek word John uses in his greeting, *apocalypsis*. Most dictionaries define an apocalypse as an event involving devastation on a catastrophic scale, like a major earthquake, hurricane, or Jimmy John’s running out of sandwiches. Although Revelation is chockfull of global devastation, the word originally meant an uncovering or revealing, literally ‘the removal of a veil.’ Theologian Catherine Keller states, “Originally the word apocalypse signified the sexually charged moment of an ancient bride’s unveiling.” Reading John’s sexually charged imagery, it is hard to imagine he was not aware of this usage.

Apocalyptic texts flourished in both Jewish and Christian forms roughly between 250 BCE and 250 CE. The apocalyptic genre involves a supernatural being revealing preordained truth through a human intermediary. Salvation is promised for the persecuted, a battle ensues, then judgment for the perpetrators, and the establishment of an eternal new order. Symbols and numerologies are used to protect the authors and propagators against reprisals from the status quo. What is “revealed” is then “re-veiled,” not just in the code of language, but in the traumatized hopes of the oppressed.

Apocalyptic texts typically involve divisions of past, present, and future. John’s apocalypse, for instance, relates events in the past tense that have not yet taken place(!). The phrase “And then I saw...” appears dozens of times. The important point is that these are not predictions of future events but accusations and hoped for comeuppances of enemies or oppressors living in the time and place of the apocalyptic authors and their communities.

Maybe you are getting a sense of where I see this two part sermon going. How do we live in a world that seems to have taken a wrong turn, at every turn? Projections in virtually every human discipline point to some pretty awful outcomes. Do we try to recapture the past? Do we boldly go where no one has gone before? What part do those who seem to oppose us play(?) other than as grapes for the winepress or fuel for the fire lake? As a Christian community, we pray that God will lead us, but how do we know we aren’t just following our best intentions faithfully guard-railed by our best interests? John’s apocalypse might help us at least better ask, if not answer, these questions.

We can start with “the double u’s.” Who was he? The greetings to the seven churches here suggest that John was a traveling preacher who may have had a similar relationship to these churches that Paul had with his communities. Where was he? The island of Patmos. It’s a little island off the west coast of what is now Turkey. There is a lovely shrine built into a cave on this island that folks believe John was sitting in as he received his visions.

Why was he there? John's own answer is a bit evasive: "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." Tradition says that he was exiled there as part of the anti-Christian campaign of the Roman emperor Domitian. I tend to be more of a literalist, I guess. What John doesn't say is as important as what he does. Historical records suggest that the Roman government did not have enough interest in this area to support that conclusion.

On the other hand, from his admonitions to the seven churches, it is clear that John and his congregations were far from lockstep agreement. He goes so far as to call one of the leaders "Jezebel" for allowing followers to assimilate into the broader community, by marriage, and by eating meat sacrificed to idols. John is attacking the very message Paul delivers in his letter to the Galatians, and may be criticizing one of Paul's followers. John's "beef" is clearly with other Christians as much as with Rome. I imagine him in some 1st century version of his mother's basement, withdrawn from further challenges to his own conclusions, and concocting horrors on social media for those who no longer ascribe to his views in order to prove they are not just wrong about everything, but responsible for the terrible way things are. Pretty cynical, I will admit, but not disallowed by John's own words, and not that far from what we see today. Call it a playful possibility.

But desperate times create desperate stories. Apocalypticism is powerful medicine for people who feel the boot of oppression. Things had been going really badly for a long time. Beginning in 2nd century BCE with Antiochus the fourth's desecration of the temple and culminating in Rome's total destruction of it in 70 CE, the Jewish faith was left asking why, and what now? Those questions were the fertile bed out of which both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism germinated and grew to grapple with each other for the answers.

Truth is, apocalyptic rhetoric has served an incredible range of struggling mean-makers. It can very effectively describe deep fear and widespread misery with an emotional drama that calls for action. In 1999, author Lee Quinby wrote,

"Apocalyptic prophecy is the most resonant discourse in the US today for expressions of hope and a sense of urgency about necessary changes in attitudes and behaviors."

And this is not necessarily a bad thing. Apocalyptic ideas can galvanize democratic movements and incite people to action on issues that this congregation takes very seriously. But do not imagine that the other side on any of these issues is not playing from the same playbook. Do not be surprised when you can barely see, through the wildfire smoke, that the ocean has turned to blood. Perhaps the re-veiled message of John is that apocalyptic methods yield apocalyptic outcomes.

Quinby writes that apocalyptic rhetoric is not the sole domain of religious fear-mongers. She identified three modes that are at play in modern times. First is divine apocalypse represented not just by the fundamentalist left-behind-ers, but also by the new agers who announce "a mass ascension into new realms of consciousness," marked by the alignment of planets, or internet bloggers clamoring for secret government agencies to come clean about hiding the remains of ET. Perhaps indigenous wisdom can save us once the civilization that tried to destroy it goes up in flames.

Second is the technological apocalypse which has two subcategories: technological devastation and technological salvation. The recent movie, *Oppenheimer*, reflects both categories in a bomb that the title character believed would render war so horrible, it would make subsequent wars inconceivable. A technology of both devastation and salvation. If only. Modern medicine prescribes drugs to treat the effects of poisons we put in our food and our environment, and then drugs to treat the side-effects of those drugs. Artificial

intelligence promises to fix the problem but what if it is just a more efficient version of the problem? What if it decides we are the problem? We pile fix upon fix and never bother to ask what started the whole toxic chain.

A few weeks ago, the Wall Street Journal ran an op ed titled, "We Will Never Run Out of Resources." The idea is that as resources run low, they become more valuable. The added value makes digging deeper more profitable, and since human knowledge and creativity (and greed) are limitless. Voila! The problem solves the problem.

Dare I say, our partisan politics fit this apocalyptic mode. What will the battle look like if the trust in our voting system falls away and other means decides who runs the land without the peaceful transfer of power?

Quinby's third apocalyptic mode is the ironic, the dystopian, nihilistic view that history has exhausted itself. Time runs out, and no rebirth follows. The trumpet blows; the veil comes down, and there is nothing behind it. There is no meaning to any of it and there never was.

These three modes overlap. Technology in the hands of divine rapture can be pretty scary, but technology guided by greed can be worse. The divine mode has a hint of the ironic in the notion that everything that happens is God's will for God's creation. God is in control. Who are we to judge? It is the notion that all the beauty, all the suffering, all the love, all the kindness we have had a part in creating in this life is rendered meaningless in comparison with the divine purpose waiting to be revealed in the next.

Lee Quinby saw the problem not with any one apocalyptic idea like the "Left Behind" rapture stories, but with any apocalypse that played on the dual dualisms of good and evil, and male and female. She suggested a feminist anti-apocalypse would unveil and disarm the threat apocalypse conceals. And we see other anti-apocalypses from marginalized communities defined by race, gender-identity, citizenship or economic status, communities speaking for other species and the environment they depend on, that are trying the same tack. But apocalypse always risks the collapse into the good self and the evil other.

I think John of Patmos is pointing to the need to receive the other. Remember, the seals, trumpets, and bowls are just the payback for the commodification and abuse of nature and neighbor. Rest assured, a separate other will ultimately have the last raging say. The final battle is fought and won by the armies of heaven, not earth, led by THE absolute other. New Jerusalem is the old Jerusalem that it could never imagine, let alone form itself to be. But John succumbs to the patriarchy and imperialism of his time. The king of kings, reigning with the ubiquitous rod of iron, looks just like a Roman emperor, except bigger. The armies of heaven fight on the same battlefield with the same weapons as the armies of the beasts, only stronger. The difference is only in quantity, not quality.

Rather than an anti-apocalypse, Theologian Catherine Keller recommends an apocalyptic mindfulness, beginning with a recognition that our modern minds imagine apocalypses at every turn, they are inescapable. We must mind them, we must face them, to see how they both inspire and unite for service, and how they divide and destroy us. Quoting Keller, "Mindfulness of the apocalypse can keep us from acting it out in private despair or collective inevitability. We have a chance of pausing the self-fulfilling prophecy of doom." She asks, "Might facing the Apocalypse in its ancient intensity help us face the apocalypse in our own time? Such facing would not mean mere recognition, submission, acquiescence. It means to confront the forces of destruction: to crack open, to disclose, a space where late chances, last chances, remain none the less real chances."

Perhaps a mindful apocalypse can cut both ways like a two-edged sword. An unveiling of truths earthly and divine, but also an unveiling of the senses that see and perceive. When the veil is removed, the seer and the seen come face to face. An apocalypse that goes both ways. Gone are the filters of what we think we know, within view and within the view of what we cannot imagine. Knowing fully, and at the same time, fully known. Ultimately unable to discern who is seeing and who is seen. Not one, not two.

I will be exploring some of these ideas next week, hopefully managing to take them a bit farther. I hope to see you there.

Benediction

May you be filled with the grace and peace of God,
who is, and was, and is to come,
and with the spirit of Jesus Christ,
God's faithful witness
who loves us and sets us free.
Amen