

Sunday, November 14, 2021

Apocalypse, Revelation, and Us: Space, Grace, and Conversion

by Jory Mickelson

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! Somehow, we find ourselves in the middle of November already and headed toward Thanksgiving. I know! The church year is winding down and we are about to start the season of Advent, which is always my favorite time of year.

We have been in a season here at Christ Lutheran Church where we have felt the longings in our hearts for a return to how things used to be and the longing for new life for our community. We wonder what is next. We wonder what God may be calling us to in the future.

We have felt the losses this year too. We have lost loved ones and remembered them on All Saints Day last week. We have mourned that some things never may get back to how they once were. I don't know about you, but as I enter middle age, I am beginning to mourn the erosion of my good memory, my quick reflexes, and my good looks. I mean we can all agree that I am very handsome. But I was a looker at 35, but it's been a decade since then. This is where some of you will start saying, "Just wait!"

The reading from Daniel this week seems to echo this sentiment. Just wait Daniel says, it is about to get a little bumpy. It is full of violence and dramatic symbolism. It tells us there will be a terrible time of anguish and upheaval. It puts us on edge. It seems to say that the end is near. That the whole world will fall apart and nothing we can do can put it back together again.

But at the same time Daniel promises that God's people will be delivered. The Bible, especially some of the Old Testament prophets, parts of the gospels, and the book of revelation are full of apocalyptic happenings. Destruction. War. Famine. Omens. The End of Everything! But what is the apocalypse? What does apocalypse mean?

Apocalypse can mean the destruction of the world. The end of everything we had up until this point known for sure. For some people this means that Christ is coming very soon, and we are living in the last times or end days.

You know who thought this? Martin Luther. Luther lived in a time of upheaval. The Ottoman Empire was invading Europe. The bubonic plague was ravaging Germany, killing people. There was famine and war. The church was corrupt and kept growing wealthier, taking more and more money from the people. Luther was convinced he too was living in the end times. He believed that the apocalypse was imminent; that Christ would return suddenly and soon. This belief gave his preaching and theology an urgency, and edge.

But apocalypse didn't originally mean destruction like we think about it today. Apocalypse originally meant to uncover or to reveal. Like a magician drawing back a scarf, revealing a bouquet of flowers in his hand. Or, like a detective in a movie who in the final scene lays all the clues together, uncovering the hidden killer.

Apocalypse meant the end to what had been hidden. It meant an end to the old way of doing things, the status quo. Luther's apocalypse shone light on or revealed the corruption and greed of religious institutions of his time. What the Catholic Church saw as apocalypse, we see today as the Reformation. Apocalypse means our old way of seeing and doing things, our comfortable understanding of the world, might come to an end.

My grandmother as a child, saw her neighbors climb up onto the roof of their home. Mother, Father, all the children. Maybe one of them even brought the family cat with them in the hot summer sun. My grandmother called up to them saying, "What are you doing up there?" Her friend called down saying, "Don't you know the world is ending?"

My grandmother was frightened. She asked her mother, if they should get on the roof of their farmhouse, so they could be saved too. My great-grandmother, in her exuberant way of expressing

things, laughed out loud. “How can you take the end of the world so lightly?” my grandmother asked shocked. My great-grandmother said, “If it comes, it comes and standing on your roof wringing your hands won’t change a thing. Nobody knows when the end is coming. Meanwhile, there are still chores to do.”

Nobody knows when the end is coming. Nobody. Not your pastor. Not a radio show host. Not a politician or a talking head on the news. The Gospel of Matthew (24:36) says, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Not the angels. Not even the son of God. Only God knows when the big Apocalypse, the big reveal, is coming. Meanwhile, there is still work to be done. Or as Luther said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.’

Yet, we love certainty. We fear the unknown. We think in our hearts that we don’t have faith if we doubt. We worry we don’t have faith if we feel fear. I can tell you that I have a lot of faith, and I also experience a lot of fear. I am a worrier. The opposite of faith isn’t fear. It isn’t. The opposite of faith isn’t doubt either. It’s not. The real opposite of faith is certainty.

When we are certain, we always miss the point. When we know for sure, we never see the loose ends, the mess, the uncomfortable stuff. When we are certain, not even God can tell us otherwise.

Have you ever noticed in scripture how God never stirs the pot without also reminding us of God’s faithfulness? The Holy One never puts on the pressure, without also reminding us of His promises. The Bible shows us something terrifying and then says, “Oh by the way, don’t be afraid!” The prophet Daniel says you shall experience a time of anguish, but that we will also be saved. Our God is faithful. God keeps his promises.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is with the apostles at the temple in Jerusalem and tells them of a time when it shall be destroyed. His disciples like all of us get worried. They love gossip. They want to

know the gory details. Maybe they even get a little shiver of pleasure out from worrying. “How awful,” one apostle says, then leans in closer and says, “Tell me more!”

Jesus says to his disciples, when you hear rumors of war, or people say they know what is about to happen, they are wrong. They will lead you astray. When someone says they are certain about the course of future events, you know they are far away from me. Jesus tells us that many alarming things will happen, but we are not to lose heart. We are not to give up.

I could tell you many stories about different kinds of apocalypse, but I will tell you one of my own. When I was 19 years old, I came out to my family, and it felt like the end of the world. My parents were devastated and confused. Our family’s religion told us that God had no place in heaven for someone like me. The person they had raised their son to be, was nothing like the person staring back at them. Our ideas about the world, our certainty for the future, our relationships all died that day. My truth was revealed and there was no going back for anyone.

Though many of you have met my parents and would never guess it today, it took ten long years of arguments and hurtful words, of painful conversations, tears, and hard silences, to bring us to a place of hope and healing where we could form new relationships. It was a time of anguish for all of us. Remember what I said in one of my first sermons here? Jesus is always about his Father’s business. And what is that business? Bringing new life, even to the most barren and hopeless of places—even to those places of death, to Lazarus in the tomb, to an empty grave on Easter morning.

There is new life at the end of my story. My family, like God’s people in Daniel were delivered. We were raised up to new life. But it took a lot of work on everybody’s part. And God was with us the whole time in the depths, in the struggle, in those dead places. The Holy One went ahead of us, knowing there could be new life when we couldn’t see it.

But this is just one story, and every family has their own apocalypse—even church families like Christ Lutheran Church. But let me tell you, God is in there with you. The Spirit has gone ahead and is calling you to places of new life. There is life for you again, even if you can't see it yet. Even if it feels like it will never come.

God is so much bigger than all of our worry and fear. The Loving One is vaster than any of our doubts and despair. Maybe we are reminded of this most when everything seems to go sideways and our tight grip on life has turned us upside down. In our own apocalypse, at the end of our own ideas and illusions, when we finally lose control. This might be the moment where God uncovers the truth about our lives. And the very place where God can finally enter in.

In 12-step spirituality, this is what is called hitting bottom. That place where there is nothing left to see, but the truth no matter how unflattering it may be. The place where we say, "I can't God, but maybe you can." People in recovery often describe this as a moment of clarity. And with this clearer vision, what is it that we need to see? About ourselves? About our families? About our church communities and the world at large?

Apocalypse. Revelation. Uncovering. We might also call it a place of conversion. It is only here that we can begin to hope in the promise of forgiveness, for ourselves and for others. It is only here we can begin to hope in God's faithful promises to us. And maybe it is here we come to know we will not be abandoned in the grave. We will not be left forever in the darkness of the pit we find ourselves in.

Each new day can be a new moment for turning toward God. A chance to uncover the truth about who is really in charge of it all. The truth that we are beloved children of a loving God. The revelation that even though we experience overwhelming fears, even though we are filled to the brim with doubts we are still held and known, and cherished. That God is with us and going ahead of us. Right now! to bring new life.