

APOCALYPSE NOW?

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
November 27, 2005

Isaiah 64: 1-9 and Mark 13: 24-37

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!”ⁱ The apocalyptic cry of the psalmist in today’s reading. “But in those days, after that suffering...the stars will be falling from heaven...Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.”ⁱⁱ The apocalyptic vision of Jesus in today’s gospel lesson. These words were written some 2,500ⁱⁱⁱ and some 2,000 years ago respectively. But apocalyptic words are very much the order of the day now as well. Witness the phenomenal success of Tim LaHaye’s and Jerry B. Jenkin’s “Left Behind” series:

Driverless cars careen out of control. Terrified people watch their loved ones vanish. Some say it’s an alien invasion, but Rayford Steele knows that his wife’s warning has come true – Christ has raptured believers and he’s been left behind.”^{iv}

As they’ve sold more than sixty-two million copies of best selling novels and related books about “the earth’s last days,” LaHaye and Jenkins have taught that this very generation here on earth now will witness the return of Christ and the end of history.^v LaHaye and Jenkins are conservative Christians. But a well-known liberal Christian theologian, Walter Wink, spoke apocalyptic warnings from this pulpit just 3 weeks ago:

Perils...threaten the very viability of life on earth today. Global warming, the ozone hole, overpopulation, starvation and malnutrition, war, unemployment, the destruction of species and the rain forests, pollution of water and air, pesticide and herbicide poisoning, errors in genetic engineering, erosion of topsoil, overfishing, anarchy and crime, the possibility of a nuclear mishap, chemical warfare or all-out nuclear war: together, or in some cases singly, these dangers threaten to “catch us unexpectedly, like a trap.”^{vi}

What are we to make of all these claims of an apocalypse now? What's the lesson for people like me who simply don't believe that the end of time is at hand? I'm not altogether optimistic that we human beings can save ourselves from our own self-destructive tendencies, but I think there's good evidence that the earth will be around for a very long time, including many of its species cockroaches and ants. And I'm betting that the universe itself will long outlive our planet and our solar system and our Milky Way galaxy.

So, let's start with the concept of apocalypse itself. What's it all about? The word, from Greek, means "uncovering" or "revelation."^{vii} It refers to the end-time event which will supposedly be marked by the sudden, dramatic, and cataclysmic intervention of God in history -- including the judgment of all human beings, the salvation of the faithful elect, and the eventual rule of this set of elect people with God in a renewed and transformed heaven and earth. The concept goes back to Zoroastrianism, founded in Persia in the sixth century before Christ, and it was subsequently developed more fully in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There was an apocalyptic literary genre that flourished in the ancient Middle East from about 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., especially in Judaism and Christianity, apparently to give hope to religious groups undergoing persecution or the stress of great cultural upheavals at that time. In the Bible apocalyptic literature stretches from the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament to the book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament.^{viii}

Jesus himself seems to have been an apocalyptic teacher. The person who sketched the clearest portrait of Jesus in this regard for the modern era was Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer, as you may know, was not just a medical missionary to Africa and Nobel Prize recipient, but also a towering New Testament scholar. Before he turned thirty, he'd written two books on the historical Jesus -- published in 1901 and 1906 -- which current biblical scholar Marcus Borg

describes as decisively shaping twentieth-century scholarship.^{ix} Schweitzer explained that Jesus expected the end of the world in his own time. As Jesus is reported saying in this morning's gospel lesson, "Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away."^x Earlier in the Gospel of Mark Jesus had addressed a crowd with these words: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."^{xi} The other synoptic gospel writers preserve similar claims of Jesus.^{xii} Jesus called people to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,"^{xiii} and he presented a radical turn-the-other-cheek ethic in the Sermon on the Mount -- about how to live in the last few months or years of the world's existence.^{xiv} Schweitzer's claim that Jesus' message must be understood in an end-of-the-world framework became a near-consensus position in mainstream biblical scholarship in the twentieth century.^{xv}

Of course these words attributed to Jesus turned out to be wrong, at least in a literal sense. The world did not end in his time. Heaven and earth did not pass away before the generation who heard him preach died. This caused considerable problems for the early Christian church, since the imminent end of the world appears to have been a universal Christian belief in the first century. Only in the second century A.D., when the world still seemed to be carrying on as usual, did the church fathers begin to develop other ways to explain Jesus' words. For example, he must not have meant the end of the world literally, but in a spiritual sense.^{xvi} Or perhaps he was speaking of time symbolically, with one day not being literally twenty-four hours but more like a thousand years.^{xvii} Hence, it's ironic that throughout Christian history the claim keeps re-emerging that we are in the earth's last days right now and that this very generation here on earth will witness the end of history.^{xviii} Don't we ever learn?

A particularly poignant example of this was a group of end-of-the-world believers studied by Stanford psychology professor Leon Festinger and others during the 1950's. They predicted the exact day that the earth would be ravaged by a series of floods, and they warned that only a faithful few would be saved. Members quit jobs, sold their possessions, and gathered to be saved, only to find that life on earth continued as usual. The classic book that chronicled the lead up and aftermath was called *When Prophecy Fails*.^{xix} From this work Festinger developed the theory of "cognitive dissonance," which he presented fully in a Stanford University Press book published in 1957.^{xx} He found that beliefs firmly persist even after their complete invalidation and that proselytizing activities actually increase – trying to convert others to a failed, but then slightly revised belief system.

In his book *When Prophecy Fails*, Festinger also describes the nineteenth century Millerites in America. William Miller was a New England farmer who, after a two-year study of the Bible, reached the conclusion in 1818 that the world would end in 1843. Although he was largely ignored for decades, by 1840 a mass movement had developed. As 1843 passed without the world ending, dates were recalculated into 1844, but still life continued as usual. Proselytizing increased, as did numbers of adherents. Only with a fourth disconfirmation of a predicted date did Millerism finally collapse. Meanwhile, many adherents had given away their earthy possessions and experienced relentless ridicule from non-believers.^{xxi} However, Millerism gave birth to the Seventh Day Adventists and other Adventists groups which reinterpreted William Miller's original prophecies and have continued as a proselytizing movement with a distinctive doctrine about the imminent end of the world.^{xxii}

So, what exactly is to be gleaned from Jesus' words, if they're not read as a prophecy of apocalypse now, in this generation? As I explained in a sermon on the Kingdom of God a couple

of years ago, I think the key may be found in all the biblical passages where Jesus compares the coming of the kingdom to the growth of a plant from a seed.^{xxiii} In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is quoted as saying: "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree."^{xxiv} In Mark, Jesus explains that "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, and he does not know how. The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head."^{xxv}

For me, the seed metaphor is useful because it implies that the spirit of God is already present, working in the world, but that it's not yet fully manifest. Jesus is the harbinger, the seed of divine presence that has been sown with his incarnational life here on earth. It's our job to water and nourish the seed that is among us and within us, to help it grow to full glory. Ultimately, though, as with the life force manifest in growing plants, we really don't how seeds sprout and grow, and we aren't finally in control. Nature is. Biblically speaking, we've been called to be good stewards of God's creation, perhaps even co-creators with God.

There's a proclamation that confirms this understanding for me in the book of Luke. It seems to bring us 180 degrees from the notion of signs imminently appearing in the sun, moon, stars, and the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. Jesus is asked by Pharisees when the kingdom of God is coming. He replies, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."^{xxvi} The Quakers say that "there is that of God in everyone."^{xxvii} The notion that the Holy Spirit of the divine is both deep within us and among us, longing to grow, is a powerful incentive not only toward respect for the inherent worth and

dignity of every person but also toward furthering the goal of world community, with peace liberty and justice for all.^{xxviii} This seed imagery is the link for me between the personal and social imagery in today's gospel lesson. We are called personally to be alert and awake -- living as if the full kingdom of God, in all of its social implications, is just around the corner. Jesus explicitly references agricultural imagery within today's lesson when he speaks of a fig tree beginning to sprout branches.

Recognizing that the kingdom of God is somehow accessible within each of us, and then living with an active expectation of its social fulfillment throughout the whole world, require us to keep awake, alert and alive as committed members of the human community. It encourages us to take care of our own spiritual lives as well as to reach out to others in need. There's a strong ethic required when we're living in the knowledge that the kingdom has already come inwardly in fledgling, seedling form in our hearts, and outwardly in Jesus' divine incarnation on earth some 2000 years ago, but has not yet come in all its glory either within us or in the world.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us some of what it means to live within God's kingdom in seedling form: "Do not resist an evildoer...If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...Give to everyone who begs from you...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you... Do not judge, so that you may not be judged...In everything do unto others as you would have them do unto you."^{xxix} Jesus instructs us for life in this world now, where the kingdom of God is already incrementally breaking into hearts and minds.

Living consciously with a sense of an inbreaking kingdom is especially appropriate at this time of year, as we enter the Christian season of Advent. We await the birthday of Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, who brings with him a vision of the kingdom of God now present among

us and within us in seeding form, and who inspires us to act in very specific loving ways, as if the full coming of the kingdom were just around the corner. What wondrous love is this, O my soul? To love and to all friends I will sing, with thanks unto the end, O my soul.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Psalm 64: 1
- ⁱⁱ Mark 13: 24-26.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 694.
- ^{iv} Advertising copy for Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins tenth anniversary limited edition of *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, <http://www.leftbehind.com/channelbooks.asp?pageid=1102&channelID=30>
- ^v "Are We Living in the End Times?"
<http://www.leftbehind.com/channelbooks.asp?channelID=131>
- ^{vi} Walter Wink sermon at the Stanford Memorial Church on November 6, 2005 (These actual words are taken from an October 17, 2001, article in *The Christian Century*, but are very similar to what he said in his November 6 sermon).
- ^{vii} Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 55.
- ^{viii} *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1978), Vol. I, pp. 445-446.
- ^{ix} Marcus J. Borg, "An Appreciation of Albert Schweitzer," in Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. vii.
- ^x Mark 13: 30-31.
- ^{xi} Mark 9: 1.
- ^{xii} Luke 21: 32; Matthew 24: 34.
- ^{xiii} Matthew 4: 17.
- ^{xiv} Borg, "Appreciation of Schweitzer," p. viii.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. ix.
- ^{xvi} *Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), Vol. 7, p. 774.
- ^{xvii} 2 Peter 3: 8.
- ^{xviii} "Are We Living in the End Times?"
<http://www.leftbehind.com/channelbooks.asp?channelID=131>
- ^{xix} Leon Festinger, Henry W. Reicken and Stanley Schacter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).
- ^{xx} Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).
- ^{xxi} Festinger et al, *When Prophecy Fails*, pp. 12-23.
- ^{xxii} The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 8.
- ^{xxiii} See the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), p. 23.
- ^{xxiv} Luke 13: 18-19.
- ^{xxv} Mark 4: 26-28.
- ^{xxvi} Luke 17: 20-21.
- ^{xxvii} George Fox, as quoted by the Philadelphia Society of Friends Yearly Meeting at www.pym.org.
- ^{xxviii} See, for this language, the purposes and principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association, adopted as a bylaw by the 1984 and 1985 General Assemblies.
- ^{xxix} Matthew 5: 39,42,44; 6: 14,19,21; 7: 1,12.