

## Apocalypse and Liberation

The Sunday after Hallowe'en, when we were considering whether Lazarus was a zombie, I made passing reference to the recent spate of "zombie apocalypse" horror movies. Today's passages, which include readings from all of the lectionary categories except the epistle, give me the opportunity to broaden that reference to include any number of other recent films, all somehow connected with the end of the world, and referred to as an overall genre of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic movies. In the years leading up to and following the turn of the Millennium, this has become quite a large segment of the filmic entertainment offered for audiences in the U.S. Just listen to this partial list from the last twenty years of end-of-the-world movies: 12 Monkeys, Alien 3 and Alien Resurrection, Armageddon, Dogma, End of Days, The Handmaid's Tale, Independence Day, The Matrix (and its follow-ups), The Postman, Tank Girl, Terminator (chapters 2 through four), Waterworld, 2012, 28 Days (and then 28 Weeks) Later, Children of Men, I am Legend, Left Behind, Meteor, On the Beach, Resident Evil (which is now in its fifth iteration and going strong), WALL-E, War of the Worlds, The Book of Eli... the list goes on and on. In fact, Wikipedia, which is a useful source for such pop culture facts, lists a total of exactly 100 apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic movies released since 1990 and I suspect many more have flown under the mass market radar.

The vast majority of these movies have a very simple message: the end of the world is coming. Be afraid. Be very, very afraid. Some, styling themselves as purveyors of Biblical truth, might rather adopt that rather crass bit of bumper sticker prophecy: Jesus is coming back and boy is he pissed. But this raises some questions. What does the Bible have to say about the end of the world? How can we understand these rather bizarre passages? What does it really mean to us, given that any number of Biblical writers, and perhaps Jesus himself, seemed to expect the end of the world to come in their lifetimes or shortly after? Why the heck am I preaching about this on a day when we're singing Thanksgiving hymns and getting ready to indulge in overconsumption of turkey and other traditional goodies? As we stand on the brink of Advent, when the lectionary often turns to these passages in an effort to remind Christians that there is something else to think about besides mass consumerism in this season of the year, we're going to explore these questions and more. I want to begin today with a review of the place of apocalyptic literature in the Scriptures and its connection with ideas of salvation, justice and liberation. So, restrain if you can the eye-rolling and thoughts of "Oh, Lord, here he goes again." I think..., I hope..., I pray that we'll walk out today celebrating, liberated and empowered.

So, what's apocalyptic writing all about? To begin with, the movies have it all wrong. The original apocalyptic tradition, found in the Bible, is about hope, not fear. It's written in poetic form, not prose. And it's about now, not what's coming. Originally, apocalyptic didn't mean "the end of the world." Let me explain. These stories became known as apocalyptic, meaning unveiled, because they disclose hidden truths. In popular imagination this came to mean that they were about arcane truths such as the end times but actually they gained this title because they were about truths hidden in plain sight. These are stories written to people living under oppression that discuss their current situations without attracting the disapprobation of those in power. They are written about now not later. In order to conceal this, they are written in code or fanciful language that will be understood by the oppressed but not the oppressors. The ultimate lesson, both to those Jews or Christians living under oppression and to those of us with far less to fear, is that God is in control and that the oppressive powers of the world are not. God's justice, the reparative justice that restores balance to the world not the punitive actions we have come to

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associate with the word justice, these stories say, will ultimately win the day. This is something every child of God should hope for not something to be feared.

So, with these ideas in mind, let's turn to the oldest bit of apocalyptic writing we have before us today, the first four verses of the twelfth chapter of Daniel. Some of you will remember that we studied bits of the Book of Daniel in "Soup, Salad & Soul" in the spring last year as we read the Deuterocanonical books of the Bible together; that is, the books used by various combinations of the Catholic and Orthodox traditions but not, in general, by Protestant Christians. Sometimes, those books are called Apocrypha, another word from that Greek root meaning "veiled," because the origins of these books were considered "veiled" or unknown, or simply less reliable. You can find the bits of Daniel that fell into this category and were carved out of most Protestant Bibles by looking at pages 102-106 of the Apocrypha section in your pew Bibles and I encourage you to read those stories sometime. But for now, it is only important to remember that besides these excised bits, Daniel actually consists of some stories dating back to the time of the Babylonian Exile of the Jews, found in chapters one through five, a story in chapter six which might feature the same protagonist but certainly gets some important details wrong, and then the rest of the book, the apocalyptic section, which purports to be set during the era of the Persian Empire but was almost certainly written during the brutal reign of the Syrian Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes, whose crimes against the Jews were bloody and devastating. Got all that?

Our verses from Daniel today are actually the end of a "vision" (apocalyptic writings are nearly always put in the form of a vision or dream) that begins with chapter 10. The vision is suitably mystic and cryptic, describing in images of terrible beasts and horrible slaughter a battle which was to bring the end of the current age and the measures which God will take to restore justice. Written as a vision of the future that appears to the righteous Daniel during the age of the Persian Empire, it is actually a fairly good historical look at the fall of that Empire to Alexander the Great of Macedonia, the division of Alexander's conquests among his generals and the rise (and predicted fall) of the abominable Antiochus.

So what is the unknown author or editor of the Book of Daniel trying to say to his contemporaries, who are being persecuted by that same Antiochus? First, he promises the intervention of a prince or archangel, called Michael, who has been assigned by God to protect the people of Israel. That's Michael, by the way, on the front cover of your bulletin this morning, in the famous statue by Sir Jacob Epstein at Coventry Cathedral, which Connie and I visited last summer. I'll come back to that a bit later. In this passage, Michael represents the power of God which will ultimately protect God's people against all evil. The writer of Daniel also reminds the persecuted Jews that things are likely to get worse before they get better, which is almost always true during the reign of a tyrant. He points out to them that God will find a way to balance the scales by rewarding the innocent and punishing the guilty even if God has to reach beyond death to do so. This is a message repeated in the teaching of Jesus and lived out in his death and resurrection, the very heart of Jesus' message of love. In the vision of Daniel which precedes our passage, "the wise," the human servants of God who remain faithful to God's desired righteousness, are slaughtered but here Daniel is promised that they "will shine like the brightness of the sky." It is a message of comfort and not terror. God is in control, Daniel is told, and in God's Kingdom, all shall be well.

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Daniel is then told to keep all of this secret, to veil it, in other words, until the time of the “end;” which is to say until the time of the reign and evil of Antiochus, when it is “unveiled” by the unknown writer to offer a message of hope to his friends. This is how Biblical Apocalyptic works: it is not a horror story, although it uses horrific elements to tell its story in often horrific times. It is not a message of fear but rather a message to those who are afraid that God has not forgotten or abandoned them and will not forget or abandon them. God, we are reassured, has a plan that will restore life even in the presence of death. The powers of this world, which so often work for evil, are not in charge and not to be feared but are to be opposed in faithfulness to God.

Jesus has a similar message for his disciples in our Gospel lesson for the morning. He has made it very clear (in what we find in Mark 11:15-17 and other passages) that he sees the current Temple and its administration not as the house of prayer for all people which it is meant to be but rather as a den of robbers, participating in the oppression of the people by the Romans and their allies. One of his disciples, though, is awestruck or perhaps merely pointing out to Jesus that those who run the Temple have wealth and power on their side. Jesus is not impressed. He knows that what happened when the Babylonians conquered Judea could easily happen again if the Romans lose patience with the always troublesome Jews. Herod’s Temple is no more immune to destruction than its predecessor built by Solomon. The corrupt Temple leadership will ultimately pay the price for their injustice and their impressive building will be pulled down around their ears. Less than forty years later, history proved him right. Indeed, Mark may have recorded the memories of those who heard Jesus say this shortly after it came to pass.

But Jesus’ powers of prognostication are not really the point. Because he understands the loving nature of God, because he understands the righteousness and justice of God’s plan, he reminds his friends of the ultimate power of God in apocalyptic terms, terms that Mark repeated with an eye to staying out of trouble, no doubt, with the Romans. Don’t be too impressed with this building, Jesus says, remember what has happened to other monument builders. Don’t be too impressed with self-proclaimed messiahs who come after me, Jesus says, remember what happened to Antiochus, who proclaimed himself a god. The One True God endures, with or without a Temple in Jerusalem, long after self-important religious leaders, generals and kings are long turned to dust. As long as human beings are greedy and cruel, wars will happen. As long as the earth spins on its axis, winds will howl and tectonic plates will shift but God remains loving and kind and will restore God’s people even in the presence of death. These are only the labor pains! The Kingdom of God which has been inaugurated in Jesus is only beginning!

“Beware that no one leads you astray... do not be alarmed... this is only the beginning of the birthpangs.” Jesus continues his “little apocalypse” in the rest of Mark 13 and we will look at more of this discourse in the weeks to come but the real message is already delivered. Don’t get distracted by these things, God is in control. Instead, keep doing the things I’ve taught you to do. Love each other. Care for the least of these, the poor, the weak, those with less than you. Don’t be afraid of those who seem powerful. You are part of the family of God, who is above all. Don’t fear anything but rejoice in God!

“Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in Yahweh; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in my victory.’” Do you remember Hannah’s story? We studied that recently in “Soup, Salad & Soul,” too. She was the wife of a man named

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Elkanah and he loved her dearly. But Hannah was barren and Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, had many children. Peninnah taunted Hannah for her barrenness and so, when the family went to the sanctuary of God at Shiloh in those days to sacrifice, she went in and prayed fervently to God to give her a son and promised to give that son to God as a priest and prophet. And God heard her prayer and she had a son named Samuel, the last of the judges over Israel, a great prophet of God and the priest who anointed both Saul, Israel's first king, and David, Israel's greatest king. On the day when Samuel was weaned and Hannah brought him to Eli, the priest at Shiloh, to be raised at the sanctuary, she sang the song which I read earlier.

Now Hannah's song, though it too is poetry and not prose, seems to have little in common with the apocalyptic literature which we've been considering. But when you begin to compare themes, you will discover that Hannah is saying straight out what the apocalyptic writers have been saying more covertly. God is in control, human strength is nothing in comparison, the world will see the justice of God, and God's people will prosper. Listen, God is in control: "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed... the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world... The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed." Listen, the world will see God's justice: "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil... He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor." It sounds like the promises made to Daniel. It sounds like the promises made by Jesus. It sounds most like the song in praise of God sung by Jesus' mother, Mary, and we'll hear that in a few weeks, too.

The writers of apocalyptic were careful not to get themselves or their listeners into trouble with the authorities. Jesus used the form for at least one set of teachings because he knew his disciples appreciated the form and were, perhaps, as fascinated with it as many still are. Hannah had experienced the blessings of God in her own body and she was bold to proclaim her thanks and her praise of God. She had been saved in the eyes of her culture by becoming a mother. She had been liberated from an unhappy death by the life of a son who could care for her in her old age and keep her memory strong when she was gone. Hannah prayed to God and God put her broken world back together. She sang out clear and strong to anyone who would listen. Can we always say the same?

We really do have a lot to be thankful for, don't we? We are all here this morning, as the saying goes, clothed and in our right minds, amen? We slept in houses or apartments that were dry and warm, amen? We had our choice of what to eat yesterday and this morning, amen? All the recent grumbling aside, we live in a country with a government that is subject to the will of the people, one in which justice is done more often than not, one in which we can speak freely and worship as we please without fear of government intervention or oppression, amen? And whether we think that the blessings of God upon us are suitable topics for educators or elected officials or the judiciary to celebrate or not, we are here this morning to follow Hannah's lead

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and lift our voices in songs of praise to the God of Abraham and Sarah and the Father of Jesus Christ, are we not?

So having fulfilled one of the most basic callings of God upon us, to praise God for God's blessings upon us and give God thanks, what are the other messages for us in these disparate but connected passages this morning? First, I believe is the lesson of Hannah: to praise and thank God whenever we can, wherever we can, in a way that is winsome to our neighbors and will be welcome to them. Nobody wants to hear us brag about what God has done for us rather than others. Nobody wants us smugly throwing our religion in their face. But when we go through life in humble gratitude, people will want to hear what we have to be grateful for. There is something open and warm about smiling. When you rejoice in your heart in what God has done for you, you will be surprised how it shows on your countenance and on how people will ask you about why you are joyful. And when you say, with humility, "I'm just grateful to God for..." even those who are not particularly interested in "God talk" are likely to smile and say, "I'm happy for you."

I'd also point this morning to the lesson of Michael, who first appears in the Bible in that apocalyptic portion of Daniel. The new cathedral of St. Michael in Coventry, built to encompass the old portion bombed into ruin during World War II, is dedicated to peace and reconciliation. So why, you may ask, is the most famous artwork of that new cathedral a warlike portrait of the Archangel of Israel victorious over Satan? It is because those charged with the rebuilding of the cathedral agreed with Paul who wrote to the Ephesians, "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." In these early days after our national elections, men and women across our country are still bitterly divided by party spirit, by partisan anger and even hatred of those who disagree with them in the realms of politics, philosophy and even theology. But we must remember, my sisters and brothers, that we are not called to hate those who disagree with us, no matter how violently they speak against us or even if they resort to physical violence. Instead, we are to do everything we can to undermine those powers which God will ultimately defeat – not people but hatred itself, fear itself, evil itself. This was the teaching of Jesus and of Paul and of Gandhi and King and Romero and all of those who work for true shalom.

There is an internet meme that has been very popular of late. It is the one that features various plays on and artistic representations of the famous words of Winston Churchill to the British people during World War II: "Keep calm and carry on." I think that's also a good summation of what Jesus was telling his disciples and us in our passage from Mark. Don't be overawed by the power of evil in the world. Keep loving, keep healing, keep helping. My pastor when I was a teenager, Rev. Dr. Homer Carter, used to like to use a phrase popularized in the rock music of the time: keep on keeping on. We don't need to be frightened of the changes in the world. We don't need to be dismayed if our candidates don't win or our ballot measures don't pass. God is in control. Every Sunday, as on Easter, as in Advent, as at Christmas, we proclaim the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Julia Ward Howe's old hymn is written in rather apocalyptic language, isn't it? It was, after all, written during the Civil War, which many in both North and South considered a holy cause. All

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of my jokes about the War of Northern Aggression aside, I am completely in sympathy with the Northern cause of the abolition of slavery, which Howe's hymn was written at least in part to promote. It's fun to sing but it's gotten a little creaky, hasn't it. It doesn't really help us remember, for one thing, the lesson of Michael that I mentioned earlier. Instead it can be used to glorify war, which is not a good thing. The version in our hymnal, surprisingly, has not been edited to reflect a less gender specific understanding of our Loving Creator. And the last line of the third verse calls for us to die to make all free, as if we were still engaged in civil war. I prefer the more recent versions that call for us to live to make all free. Very few of us in this country at this time are called to die for our faith, at least not physically. So, I'd like for us to sing this song this morning with one change. Trying to edit all the "he's" as we sing would be too difficult but let us remind each other that we should live to make all free. Even in apocalyptic passages of the Bible, God promises life. That is a promise we can believe in. Thanks be to God.