

First, here is a **quick review** of what we talked about two weeks ago. We looked at **various types of literature** in the Bible. This is important because these various types make different points, and they have different values and meanings. There is myth, legend, legal codes, history, poetic story telling, hymns or psalms, proverbs, prophetic words, laments, parables, letters or epistles, and finally apocalyptic writing. Some of the writing promised a glorious future, some condemned the enemies of Israel, some chastised Israel for disobedience, some comforted, some instructed. Some spoke of killing children as the will of the Lord, yet some spoke of feeding one's enemies. These are varied and each has to be studied to discern its purpose.

With this variety of points of view, how does a person discover which words are to be believed to be the Word of the Lord? The Reformed tradition, to which Presbyterians belong, looks at scripture through the lens of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, we believe that the life, death, and resurrection reveals the grace, mercy, peace, and justice of God. That is the Gospel. That is the standard we use to evaluate what parts of scripture are the Gospel of God. The great Presbyterian preacher of Riverside Church Ernest Campbell has written that the Bible is essential to the church, but taking it seriously does not mean taking it literally.

Now, about the type of literature called “apocalyptic.” What is “apocalyptic” literature? “Apocalyptic” means, “the uncovering,” or “revelation.” in this instance, the uncovering or revelation of the future. Apocalyptic writing forecasts the ultimate destiny of the world, it tells of the cosmic cataclysm in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to live in a messianic kingdom. We find apocalyptic literature in various books like Daniel in the Old Testament, parts of the Gospels, and the last book of the Bible, The Revelation to John.

In contemporary literature we find apocalyptic meanings in the Left Behind series, by Tim Lahaye, in which he predicts that, any day now, that God will come to earth and take those who are righteous into the Rapture, leaving sinners to suffer a world of cataclysm and destruction. And the sinners are homosexuals, secular humanists, abortionists, Jews, Muslims, feminists, and civil libertarians.

We also mentioned the influence of apocalyptic writing in political life. Many conservative Christians hope for the apocalypse which calls for return of Jews to Israel as a prelude to the final struggle in which Jews will follow a new messiah, suffer terrible losses, be converted to Christianity, and finally be superseded forever in the advent of the Christian millennium. Such apocalyptic thinking calls for the USA to exercise its power as the New Israel imposing democracy and Christianity on all nations of the world, preparing the righteous for the rapture, and the rest for destruction.

What is appealing about apocalyptic theology to some people? Religious extremism is a reaction to social change. Many people feel left behind and yearn for the righting of wrongs. We lose jobs to outsourcing, pensions and health benefits to stressed companies or the thievery of officers. The gap between the rich and poor has widened, people are driven out of the middle class into the poor. What role do apocalyptic dreams play? Dreams of apocalyptic glory insure us of triumph over our enemies, and the ultimate reward to good people while the bad are punished.

What have most main line churches done with apocalyptic theology? Many Protestant denominations have tried to moderate apocalyptic beliefs by focusing on the possibility that the apocalypse began in the life of Jesus Christ and everyone since has been living in a process like the end of time. That is, each moment is loaded with final judgment, and every soul is held to account for ever more saintly behavior. When the world has been sufficiently evangelized and societies have been Christianized by the work of the church, then the messiah will come again for a final judgment. But these churches stop short of saying what the final judgment will be, as that is left up to God. That is a very common interpretation by mainline Protestant churches. Such churches offer rituals that help us face cataclysm in a symbolic way. Adult baptism is a way of dying to rise again to new life. The Eucharist, or Communion, is a way of both being a part of the disciples who ran away, and having a savior die for us that we might live. It is also a way of seeing a world turn against God, and yet God offers us forgiveness.

Now to our main point. Richard Fenn suggests another way of interpreting apocalyptic literature. He suggests that the Gospel accounts of Jesus present a heroic figure who is thoroughly secular, and yet the bringer of the new age, an age of mercy, justice, grace, and peace.

What does he mean by the word “secular?” In this context he means a person who is worldly in the sense that the person deals with the here and now, is thoroughly grounded in this world, and finds God’s presence here and now. This person is not locked into the past by regrets or guilt, does not carry sorrows and guilt into the present, and does not fear the future, but enters it with trust in God, wholeheartedly, with strength and without hesitation.

We find this person in the Gospels, and particularly in the Gospel of Mark, which was written in a time of disaster and chaos. It was a time of a civil war that consumed much of Palestine and razed Jerusalem from 66 to 73 CE. It was a time when anything could happen anywhere. Terror and mercy, cruelty and devotion, took place at all levels. Interpreting life got beyond the priests and rabbis. Days of ritual were disrupted by violence and rebellion. In some small way, this reminds me of the 1970’s when pastors and preachers had hard time interpreting a Christian response to the Vietnam War, when families and schools experienced chaos, and cities burned, and the young and elderly were separated from one another. Even now, we experience a sense of dread about the future, harbor questions about the ability of democracy to survive, and are anxious about the worldwide clash of culture and religions. Apocalyptic literature surfaces in times of prevailing dread.

The Gospel remembered Jesus as someone who entered the chaos of the times, and responded with all his self to the immediacy of humans in need. In those shattered times he healed the sick and fed his disciples when the need arose rather than when the sacred calendar permitted. He met the mentally disturbed on the highways, and liberated the insane from their demons. He spent days and nights in villages, attending to the sick and troubled who were brought to him. He demonstrated that the only way to live in the present is with the radical freedom of the self that allowed him to heal on the Sabbath, eat with sinners who were despised by the religious leaders, go to the land of his nation’s enemies, and finally to turn his own face toward his death in Jerusalem. He told his followers the kingdom of God can come any time and any place. Time made no difference to him; he raised Lazarus on his own schedule and healed the daughter of Jairus when his servants said she had died. He is the apocalypse, creating his own time, and using it for redeeming rather than destroying.

What are some of the characteristics of this Jesus? Here are four, just a few, but suggestive.

First, he had no need a mediator and addressed God as father with directness and immediacy, revealing the presence of God right then and there, not with horrible punishments, but with divine healing and reconciliation.

Second, he set human need above custom and tradition and institutional priorities, declaring that religious institutions were made for humanity, not the other way around; and religious laws were intended to bring healing and reconciliation, not separation and condemnation. The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. He revealed the propensity for leaders to govern for their own sakes, and he challenged institutions that failed the very people whom they claimed to protect. When he challenged the Temple, saying its days were numbered by the revolution to come, when the people of Israel would murder each other in civil war, he called himself a “temple” meaning that God’s concern for mankind was the true purpose of such institutions.

Third, he established justice, but not the way current fear mongers described it. Matthew wants us to know that justice will be done, and he tells us this in his description of the crucifixion and resurrection. “Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs were also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came to the holy city and appeared to many. “

Those who had suffered in the past for their faith, those who had been cheated, swindled, cast off, and persecuted, came to the holy city. The past was redeemed, the forgotten were remembered, and those who bore the wounds of society were healed. Secrets were cried from the housetops, past debts were paid; the day of Jubilee had finally arrived with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospels are declaring that Jesus is the apocalyptic hero, and he brings mercy and justice, here and now. This is very different from the interpretations of the apocalypse that threaten us with the wrath of God in some future.

Fourth, Jesus discouraged apocalyptic speculation. He told his disciples that the kingdom could come any place any time. The heart of the Gospel is his immediate presence with his followers. Pay the laborers; keep your lamps lit, heal on the Sabbath, buy the field, meet Jesus on the road, at the meal, in the home of a sick person. “Immediately”, as Mark constantly says; it is not chronology that matters, but the needs of the moment. Interrupt his journey to go to the house of the dying daughter. Stop and talk to the woman who touched his robe. Let the little children come forward. Drop everything to do it now. Do not stand on ceremony. The apocalyptic moment is now.

One summary way to look at his life in apocalyptic terms is to recall the story of the “temptations.” The story of his temptations helps us understand the apocalypse as an ongoing struggle. The story of the temptations in the Gospels makes it sound as if it were a one-time thing, but, in truth, each day was a day of temptations. Each day was a struggle for meaning. Meaning came from devoting himself, not primarily to the temple, or the nation, or a new social order, but to bringing life back to God, and letting God enter life through us. By the cross and empty grave, he reestablished the meaning and power of God’s mercy and justice. By Good Friday and Easter, God’s new community was established. This new community is characterized by genuine care for

one another, and justice for those who are left behind, no matter their gender, race, or nationality. Such is the apocalyptic community.

We enter the apocalyptic present, the moment, now, with Easter. Mark reports that the women go to the tomb and see “a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here...but go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’” Our future is that of following Jesus just as did the disciples. Like them, we go back to the beginning, to his call to follow him as he gathers the lost, and challenges the institutions that have ceased to care about people. We don’t yet live in the resurrection age, but we follow one through the tribulations and hopes of this age in the assurance that the future belongs to God.

Why, then, do we have nationalistic and threatening dreams of apocalyptic glory in the Bible?

In the editorial composition of the Gospel stories an apocalyptic framework is imposed on the stories, sayings, and parables. They are not originally in Hebrew thought. They come from Persia. In ancient Persian thinking there were two opposing gods of good and evil who would fight for possession of the world, and all living things were divided according to their allegiance. The scribal communities who compiled the Gospels in the aftermath of the devastating civil war and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple wrote apocalyptic dreams of glory into the Gospels. The failure of the dream of glory for Israel, and for Christians, led them to reinsert the apocalyptic dream in the Gospels. They wrote that God was the source of such disaster and such disaster is God’s punishment upon the world.

The Gospels originally did not say that. They said that the role of Jesus was to secularize the apocalypse by making it a part of the mundane world rather than by postponing it to a mysterious time and place.

Finally, what about today? When we entertain an idealism that might capture our hearts, but distances us from reality, we open ourselves to this sort of apocalypticism. Dick Fenn points to the time when Germany was defeated in World War I, the leader of the Bavarian republic, Kurt Eisner, called on Germany for a national purification of everything, of all that was sinful, corrupt in the nation, and for an admission of war guilt, so that the nation could be beautiful, healthy and pure. But that set up the nation for Hitler and his dreams of glory. It works better for modern nations, not to be caught between national contrition and purification that overcomes the past and initiates a new future --- but to undertake a process of continuous and incremental changes, none of them based on drastic change. Such a process of continuous changes none of them based on dramatic repudiations of the past or on grandiose gestures of introducing the future, takes the passage of time seriously enough to dispense with imaginary attempts to transcend it. This would mean living without dreams of glory, or any charismatic leader, whose claims cannot be put to the test of time.

Apocalypticism and dreams of glory have been used in formulating foreign policy. I am not qualified to make foreign policy suggestions, but I do have some knowledge of biblical literature and theology. In that context, I think that, as we deal with the rest of the world, and right now that means the Middle East, it is important to refrain from dramatic repudiations of the pasts of other people, and to be wary of dreams of glory and charismatic leaders. The apocalypse of Jesus, as Dick Fenn and I understand that, calls us to deal with people as they are, to pour our resources into healing, making peace, supporting families and children, uncovering the secrets of the past, and dealing honorably with past with justice.

What is useful about apocalyptic literature? It is the Bible's way of calling us to stretch our imaginations, to realize that armies get out of control, that governments become corrupt or exert such control that they rob all meaning from life. Apocalyptic thinking stretches our imagination to the furthest limits of what could happen. It reminds us that the past must be dealt with or it will keep the future from happening.

I also believe that we would do well to think with an apocalyptic frame of mind; that is, is to ask how prepared we are for an apocalypse of our own making, such as failures of technology, as at Three Mile Island, the wrong assumptions of government regarding the levees of New Orleans, the mismanagement of the catastrophe left by Katrina, the breakdown of community as hundreds died in the Chicago heat wave, and the flooding of the Mississippi River due to the use of land for commercial and industrial development instead of allowing the land to absorb the river when it flooded. It requires apocalyptic imagination to consider the threat of avian flu or a dirty bomb in the Newark ports, and the steps necessary to save millions when it happens. An apocalyptic imagination is the first step in saving ourselves from disaster and cataclysm.

We live with the faith that God is on the side of humanity. It is certainly time for humanity to get on the side of God.

(Much of the above comes from Richard Fenn's book *Dreams of Glory, the Sources of Apocalyptic Terror*. And many of the sentences and words in this presentation are his.)