

December 4 2016

Scripture Lesson

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Matthew 3:1-12

Sermon *Apocalyptic Language*

People get ready! Your world is about to be rocked! *Is that “good news” or “bad news” for you??* I suppose that the announcement that the world is about to be turned upside down, shattered, or re-arranged is “good news” or “bad news” depending on where you happen to be standing, or where your life is, when you hear the news. And, of course, one might think one is hearing good news when one is actually hearing bad news.

On September 11th, 2001, Osama bin Laden thought he was hearing good news. Little did he know that for him the destruction of the World Trade Center was for him personally actually bad news.

If your world is happy, pleasant, secure and fixed; then the announcement that this world is about to shift may sound threatening. On the other hand, if you live where the mass of human beings live – in a realm of grief, sadness, poverty, distress, or injustice – then Isaiah’s poetic word that a new world is coming is decidedly “good news!”

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

At the beginning of this past century Albert Schweitzer wrote a book, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, which shook both the church and scholars. One of Schweitzer's contentions was that Jesus, like many Jews of his day, appeared to believe that the world was coming to an end in a great cataclysm. God was going to end the world soon. Yet, obviously, those predictions were wrong, or people misunderstood the prediction. It didn't happen as expected.

The world did not end when the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. This was just one more in the long story of injustices and tragedies – and the list grows longer each year. The world rumbles right along.

Think about all Jesus' parables that speak about the need to be vigilant, to wait for the return of the Master of the household. Recall Jesus' talk of the clouds, the visions, the wreckage, the destruction. Schweitzer was certainly right in noting that most of the New Testament is utterly apocalyptic, future-oriented, visionary speech, speech, not intended to warn us, but to give us hope.

What is this apocalyptic talk and what are contemporary Christians supposed to do with it? Apocalyptic language is language about what we might call “**earth shattering events.**” We strain for language to describe those events, those moments when it is as if the world tilts on its axis and everything that once *was* crumbles and something new is born. In our country, July 4, 1776 was an earth shattering event. So was December 7, 1941 and September 11th, 2001. Perhaps even the elections of 2016. Anyone who experienced these events I think would say, “The world looked different the morning after.” Speaking metaphorically, we might say, “These events shook the foundations of our world.”

When, in the book of Daniel, or Ezekiel, Jewish writers spoke of the moon turning red, the clouds descending, angels gathering Israel together; they were speaking in this way, speaking in metaphors about earth-shaking events. They spoke in poetry, which is always better than prose for this sort of active, energetic language pushed to the limit. They *could have* said it more prosaically like this: God's people are badly oppressed, yet God will soon help us, and when this happens it will be a world changing event in which God's people will at last be set up over all the world.

Instead, they said it in poetry, for only poetry has the power to move us to the depths, to shatter, to tear down and rebuild the world.

So when we read about the Son of Man descending in the clouds we're not so much reading about supernatural events that occur some other place and time, but earth shattering happenings that take place here in earthly political, military, and economic events. The odd, poetic language is not meant as secret code to hide

things from us, but rather is meant to reveal the true theological significance of these events.

When the Civil Rights Bill was signed, one of our senators proclaimed, “This is a great *watershed* in our age, a sign that a **new age is dawning**.” He wasn’t referring to waste water management in Washington, nor was he predicting that tomorrow the sun would rise in a new way. He was attempting to state the deeper, truthful significance of *what to some* might appear as just another bill making it through the Senate, a President putting his pen to paper and nothing more. What some might see as a piece of legislation, *others* knew to be a sign of a coming flood, a great wave, a sun rising, a new freedom.

So when the Old and New Testament writers speak of “the end” of the world, they do so not in meaning that the world would stop in a flash, but rather they meant that we were **about to see the end of the way their present world was being run**. All those who were in charge of the old world – those generals, politicians, priests who profited from their present order – were going to be dislodged, displaced, and the Kingdom of God would be inaugurated. There would be a visible, earthly change in the course of things, earth-shattering events would occur in which God’s will would finally be done on earth as in heaven.

This is what many Jews of Jesus’ day expected; a vast, political-economic turnaround known to them as “the end,” when at last the kingdom of God would be revealed in its fullness. Mary sang about it in her Magnificat found at the beginning of Luke’s gospel. Jesus taught about it in many of his parables of reversal. John the Baptist spoke in this way when he announced the arrival of Jesus.

While Jesus transformed much of the traditional teaching about “the end,” he clearly expected it as something **here and now**. Was he wrong?

No. After his death and resurrection, the church came to understand that “the end” had really occurred. The end, in the sense of an earth-shattering event, had happened. It happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus. That was the end of the world. In Jesus’ death the world, the old world, had shown what it was made of. The kingdoms of this world pulled out all their stops and did their **worst** at the cross of Jesus. And there, they were defeated. Jesus submitted to the world as it was, and in his resurrection unmasked and defeated the old world. That world ended at Calvary. And a new world began taking place as his followers gathered around a table.

When the first atomic bomb was dropped on Japan, President Truman was on board a Navy ship, returning from a conference of the Allies. He was handed a note that informed him of the successful drop of the bomb. He turned to a group of sailors on the battleship and told them, “This is the greatest news in the history of the world.” This was, in other words, the greatest of all earth-shattering events.

Christians believe that Truman's summation was wrong. Down through the years, many kings, politicians, generals, have believed that they were the initiators of earth-shattering events. In reality, they were only taking their place in the long, not too eventful procession of violence, hate, and destruction that the world calls "history."

In Jesus, all of this was brought to an end. In Jesus Christ, God is bringing history to its fulfillment. The earth is shifting on its axis. In Jesus Christ, our human story is being reconstructed, reordered, changed; one person at a time as each gives his or her life to follow Jesus. Let Jesus turn your world upside down.