

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Rev. William Love
Sunday, November 15, 2009

Of That Day

1 Samuel 1:4-20
Hebrews 10:11-18, 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

It was February — I believe the year was 1974. I went to a Bob Dylan concert in Atlanta. On the way into the Omni, the arena where the concert took place, I was handed a tract. Once I had found my seat, I read it while I waited for the concert to begin. The tract was about biblical prophecy.

That was the year that the Comet Kahoutek appeared. At this time was to be the closest it would come to Earth. The tract purported to find in Revelation prophecies that pointed directly to the Comet Kahoutek as the signal event of the Second Coming of Christ. It would take place sometime between then and the end of March of that year.

I read the tract with a skeptical, bemused interest. As I was thumbing back through the pamphlet, I noticed something that I had missed the first time through. It was a little circle with the letter **c** in it, which indicated that the material in the tract had been copyrighted. In 1974, copyrighted material was protected for 28 years with the author's having the option to renew the copyright for an additional 28 years.

It seemed strange to me then — as it seems strange to me still — why anyone would take such lengthy copyright protection on a tract that predicted that the world as we know it would end in less than six weeks.

Presumably the author would not be able to exercise the option to renew and I don't think God is bound by copyright law.

That is still the view I take about such predictions. And it seems to me that, without the curmudgeonly cynicism, Jesus made an allied point when he said: *Of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*

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The widow had just put in her two coins and passed unnoticed by everyone except Christ and those to whom Christ pointed her out. They had, of course, missed the point by saying, *Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!*

Jesus then responded with these apocalyptic sayings that we find in Mark: *Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down. ... Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, **I am he!** and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the sufferings.*

It is interesting that the apocalyptic sayings are not separated from the present. Jesus began with the Temple which surrounded them and so impressed the disciples.

The church to whom Mark wrote this gospel was faced with an imminent destruction of the Temple, when not one stone would be left standing upon another.

The church to whom Mark wrote this gospel was faced with an increasing vulnerability as those who expected an imminent return of Christ were beginning to lose that hope.

The church to whom Mark wrote were facing immediate persecution for which they needed courage and encouragement to sustain them.

Eschatological and apocalyptic literature deal with *end-times*. Eschatological literature stands more or less in the present looking toward the end of time. Apocalyptic literature stands in the midst of the ending of time, often in the midst of some kind of Armageddon, and describes the events of the ending of time.

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Those can perhaps best be understood as devices to help us look at the present. Science fiction, for example, often takes themes, attitudes, behaviors that are present today and extends them into the future, giving them an increasingly important role. The purpose is not to predict that that is what will happen in the future. The purpose is to show us what is present now and what its potential is for good or for ill.

Apocalyptic literature similarly and forcefully confronts us with the present by showing us in the end-time what judgment will be placed upon such behavior. In Matthew's apocalypse found in the 25th chapter, the sheep are separated from the goats with the determination being based on how each had treated *the least of these, my brothers and sisters*, for the way we treat them is the way we treat Christ. That passage as apocalypse tells us less about Judgment Day and more about taking a hard and honest look at ourselves and the way we treat the people we meet day to day and even the way we treat the people that we avoid meeting day to day.

The purpose of eschatological and apocalyptic literature is to confront us with our own present. And they confront us with the standards of God rather than our own rationalized standards. We need to be concerned about God's time (the time when God's kingdom is realized) and not about timing.

Of that day or that hour, Jesus said, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

To be concerned about timing pulls us to look at the future and to avoid looking at the present, and thus to miss the point. It is the living faithfully the mission of Christ in the present that we are to be concerned with.

Mark is writing to a church that is not only struggling to survive but to interpret the confusing events which are almost overwhelming to their faith and their understanding of discipleship. [Fred Craddock *et al.*, **Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year B (After Pentecost)**, 258] And that description applies whether we are talking about 1st century Judea or 21st century Virginia.

It was important for the church then and the church now *to develop a spirit of discernment. In the midst of opposition from without, there is also the threat from within, from voices that speak "in my name" but seek to lead members of the community astray. The language...seems to reflect Deuteronomy 13, where warnings take on an ominous quality by noting that the tempters may be members of one's own family, even "the wife you embrace, or your most intimate friend" (Deut. 13:6).*

The modern church knows aplenty about voices that talk a good game, use many of the right formulas, but at heart worship at a different altar. There are those who offer a crossless religion, a Christianity without tears; others who wed the faith to the nation and demand a patriotic ideology; still others who are advocates of religion's utilitarian functions—arguing the importance of prayer as an effective means of self-enhancement. ...

[T]he church's precarious situation demands of it incredible patience. Believers are not to get excited about this or that event, this or that voice, and assume that it portends the final coming of the kingdom. Instead of becoming frantically alarmist, the church is to take the long look, to be patient.

It has often been the temptation...to assume that the eradication of the most pressing evil or the achievement of the most immediate goal will somehow usher in the reign of God. Success then brings with it a certain disillusionment, because there remain so many more evils to eradicate, so many more goals to achieve. The text indicates...that the calendar is in God's hands, and that neither omens nor accomplishments guarantee the ultimate fulfillment of God's purposes. What is called for is patience.

[I]n spite of all that transpires, the church is invited to be hopeful. War, threats of wars, earthquakes, famines represent the worldly chaos in which the Markan community finds itself. The woes may be changed, but any church that remains faithful is bound to find itself

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beleaguered and vulnerable. There will be little objective data to warrant optimism about the future.

*And yet all this chaos is understood to be "the beginning of the birthpangs" (13:8) The image is striking. It takes seriously the reality of the present sufferings. There is no Pollyanna denial of pain. But in the economy of God the sufferings have a purpose. They signal the end of a long time of waiting and the coming birth of new life. The sufferings do not lead to despair, but to hope, to the anticipated dawn of God's new day. [Brueggemann et al., **Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV--Year B**, 594]*

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One preacher talked about the pain of childbearing this way:

The pain of childbearing is not one and once.

It is twofold; and it comes twice; and I am astonished by the love revealed in such a miracle.

***Twofold:** There are two kinds of suffering which attend the physical bearing of children into this world. The first is that a woman must make space in her body for a baby; and doing that, she sacrifices a host of personal goods: her shape, hormonal equilibrium, energy, her freedom to sleep in any position, beauty (so she sometimes feels) and, with these, her self-esteem.*

Did I call such a sacrifice a suffering? Well, it is, I suppose. But the wonder is that such suffering also contains the sudden spasms of joy, and that both should come together. The woman who groans is the same who laughs to feel life within her—and I am astonished.

*Then, the second suffering of bearing children is the opposite of the first. Having made space for the baby, she must now empty the space. It does not matter how much she has invested in carrying the child. At the end of nine months she's asked to give it up, to separate herself from it, to deliver it whole and squalling into existence, "Go out of me," her muscles say, her womb, her leaning forward, her very self says to the infant: "Go out of me, in order to **be**."*

And this is suffering. (The work is so hard.) Yet this also contains the sharp spasm of joy. (Here is life!) And I am astonished that two such things can be together.

***Twice:** Any reasonable person might think that once through this curious drama of love were enough. Once to labor at making room; once to labor at emptying it. But the mother is asked to do it all over again.*

For now the child is not in her body, but in her life.

Again, she sacrifices a host of personal goods to give the child the space in which to grow. Her schedule is broken a thousand times by his untimely needs. Her energies are divided. Her sense of accomplishment is shattered every time she does the laundry without gratitude, because it is an endless task endlessly taken for granted. ... Her hair hangs in her face so often that she sees herself unbeautiful; rather, she is called to question: "Why did you do that? Are you going out tonight? Who'll watch over us?" She grows tired. She goes to bed early, and her husband says, "What's the matter? You sick or something? Don't you want to be with me any more?" And she makes space for her children. Beauty she sacrifices, and freedom, and with them, self-esteem.

Suffering, did I say? Certainly. Yet at the same time—and this is too high for my understanding—it contains the sudden spasms of joy. She laughs to see her child's emerging life, his walking, his talking, his raking the leaves, his baking cake alone. How is it she can do both?

Then, for the second time, comes the second suffering.

At the child's maturity, she must birth him not out of her body, but out of her house and into the world, an independent being.

*It doesn't matter how much she has invested in raising him. By stages, now, she labors to let him go. By degrees she loosens the reins, knowing full well the dangers to which she sends her child, yet fearing the greater danger of clinging to him forever. And now her hurt is the hurt that **he** will encounter on his own. (Will he survive in a careless existence and thrive?) And beside that, her hurt is loneliness. To **be**, he must be **gone**.*

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*This is childbearing at its most laborious.
On my first day in the first grade, I panicked and cried and raced back to the car where my mother was, ran top speed before she drove away from me.*

"Mama! Take me home!"

I thought she would be so happy to see me and to discover my undiminished need of her presence, her love and her protection. I sat smiling in the front seat and heard the car's ignition even before she turned the key. She never turned the key.

Only now do I understand her own tears as she took my hand and walked me back into the school again.

"Mama, do you hate me?"

*"No! No, not at all. I love you—" [Walter Wangerin, Jr., "Body of Christ, You're a Woman!", **Ragman and Other Cries of Faith**, 99-101]*

* * *

The pain of childbirth is the frequent biblical image for the suffering of that day. Once the labor pain starts there is no turning back. You must go through it. Of course, through it, waiting at the end, is new life. Our new life. That does not underestimate the suffering. It speaks of its value.

The preacher's description speaks as well of God's suffering as the mother who, in response to the child's (to our) question, "Do you hate me?", tells the child, "No, not at all. I love you."

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The images of apocalyptic literature are no scarier than the reality of a 24-hour labor. The fear is no scarier than the first-grader's wanting to go home where he knows it is safe only to be taken back into the school.

In the end, we will find that we have new life, whole and perfect, given by God just as God gave us life in the first place. And given the experiences that we need rather than just the easy ones we want, we have a heavenly parent who loves us.