

Vision of Hope

sermon digest

February 1, 2015

Isaiah 2:2-5; Revelation 21:1-6

larry dipboye

The Book of Revelation, the last book of our Bible, is perhaps the most controversial scripture to be included in the Canon of writings that have come to be known as "The Bible." The love-hate relationship with this book of visions goes back to the earliest years of Christian history and continued throughout the years of biblical formation. Studies of the Canon note that the Book of Revelation almost missed the boat. Early Church Fathers were uncomfortable with the visionary structure and the difficult task of interpretation that often led to wild speculation and repugnant aberrations. Many early Christians avoided the book, while others preferred to leave it out of the collection of sacred writings. "Left Behind" is an appropriate title for the story of Revelation.

Although met with as much ridicule as praise, the thirteen *Left Behind* novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins published from 1995 to 2007 have been bestsellers. The latest of four *Left Behind* movies was just released in October, 2014, and reflects the controversial nature of this brand of eschatology. Based on sixty reviews, *Rotten Tomatoes* gave the movie a 2% positive rating and concluded: "Yea verily, like unto a plague of locusts, Left Behind hath begat a further scourge of devastation upon Nicolas Cage's once-proud filmography." Paul Chambers from *MovieChambers.com* begins his scathing review with, "There are millions of Christians with average or above-average intelligence. I'd like to think that I'm one of them. So, what possessed the makers of Left Behind to produce such an ignorant piece of garbage that's easily one of the worst films of 2014, if not all-time?" The conservative Christian journal *Christianity Today* judged, "Left Behind is not a Christian movie, whatever 'Christian Movie' could even possibly mean." The review referred to Christians within the world of the movie as "insistent, crazy, delusional, or at the very least just really annoying." The article concluded: "We tried to give the film zero stars, but our tech system won't allow it."

To be fair, the *Left Behind* stories are fiction, not fact. They have been widely judged by my kind of theologian as a distortion of biblical and of Christian faith. This is the kind of misguided speculation that has given Revelation a bad name. It is also an example of the long-standing controversy over apocalyptic writing that has caused churches and theologians to avoid the last book of the Bible like the plagues that it contains. The controversy has largely revolved around issues of interpretation. The problems explode when visions of hope are viewed as literal predictions of future events. The Apocalypse is a book of visions, not a detailed roadmap to end-time events; it is a call to steadfast faith in the God of hope in spite of the tragedies of life and history.

Human experience cries out, "Is there any hope?" The question of hope is not the exclusive interest of people of faith. It rises out of the common human experience with failure, sickness, disaster, death, and grief. It is not the question that we normally ask at the beginning of life at the birth of a healthy child or at the typical wedding of people entering adulthood. It is not the winners issue raised by the victor at the Super Bowl or the World Series or by the winner of the state lottery. As long as you can stay on top of the world and in control of your personal history you have no need to challenge the future even if at the pauses of life you find yourself wondering how life will end. My calling and vocation have not allowed me to look away from the dark side of life. Although not always in words, I have heard the question of hope raised at hospitals and in funeral homes, from people mired in poverty and from competitors left with the stigma of "loser." The question is dismissed by cynics on the dark side usually as a declaration of despair. The Apocalypse, translated into English "The Revelation," raises the question as the ultimate inquiry for people of faith. Imitating a class of literature that emerged in the struggle to re-establish Judaism in the Land of Promise sometime after the Exile, Jewish apocalyptic writing seemed to thrive on despair. When the Jewish nation had lost independence and the promise of the land dissolved into the poverty, servitude, and defeat by superpowers, prophets dared to ask, "what about the future, what next?" When all hope was gone, visionaries emerged to picture in words the ultimate end of things for people who have lost everything except the lingering possibility that God is Lord of history. The best biblical examples are the Old Testament Book of Daniel and the New Testament Book of Revelation.

The apocalyptic message is both yes and no. Yes stands in spite of the apparent victory of evil;

God has the last word in history. Pain, suffering, tears, all human experiences of evil are assigned to total negation. In a world created by a good and loving God, evil has no lasting hope, no ultimate existence. As world shadows are exposed to the burning light of the divine presence, the vision of light, of love, of hope emerge as the holy city Jerusalem coming from God as a bride adorned for the wedding. Remember, apocalyptic is Jewish hope that centers in the City of Jerusalem. John's vision came sometime after 70 CE, when Jerusalem was wiped off the face of the earth by the Roman general Titus.

The vision of a New Jerusalem in Revelation reflects a long held Jewish belief that the establishment of Jerusalem as the City of God was the hope not only of the Jewish nation but of the whole world of nations. Before the Exile, Isaiah began with hope for the ultimate victory of Jerusalem. Second Isaiah following the return of the Exiles promised a New Jerusalem. As the seventh of seven visions, Revelation 21 reaches the ultimate hope and final message, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth." The funeral was over. The first heaven and earth had, in mortuary euphemism, "passed away." The sea was "no more." The Jews had always hated the ocean; it was the symbol of the chaos before the creation, "without form and void." The City would come from God, out of heaven, as a bride ready for the wedding. In the ultimate sense of the name Emmanuel, "God with us," the hope attached to the birth of Christ would be fulfilled. This will mark the end of tears, death, mourning, and pain. In a word—HOPE. Yes, the God who is Alpha, who was at the beginning the creator of the entire universe, is not finished. The Alpha is also the Omega, the God who will finish the new creation, the God of hope.

Visions of faith in the God of hope contain the kernel of truth. I was a seminary student when Jürgen Moltmann published *Theology of Hope*. Having come out of World War II as a German prisoner of war totally disillusioned by the Jewish Holocaust and the insane destruction of the Third Reich, he was given a New Testament by a chaplain. In reading the Psalms of lament and the Gospel narratives on the death of Jesus he discovered the God who not only understands our pain but enters it with us. His first book shocked theologians with anchoring his faith in the God of hope. He gave eschatology, that had been largely ignored, the primary place in his thinking about God. In a world prone to despair, the basic sin of humanity, God calls us to hope.

The great medieval artist Raphael, a contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, was said to have explained the key to his works of art, "I have visions and paint around them." Throughout the Bible, dreams and visions have been the source of divine revelation. At the Christian Pentecost, Peter cited the Prophet Joel that the elderly will dream dreams and youth will see visions. The aged tend to dream of what was. Youth leans toward the future envisioning what will be. Visions are cast forward. They never give us a photograph of what is to come. Prophetic visions are not crystal balls or tea leaves given to predict the future, but authentic visions are bearers of the truth of God to people of faith.

To be sure, mystical, visionary religion is risky business. Visionary faith is not a substitute for wide-eyed confrontation with the world that is. We are never called away from the truth to the pursuit of the childish world of wishing. Someone is always someone ready to exploit the gullible and the naive.

In *Psychology of Religion*, Wayne Oates raised warnings about a religion based on fantasy. He described the primary role of faith as a challenge to escapism and the flight from reality. He identified the temptations of Jesus as enticement toward an unreal and magical world where stones are turned to bread, where one may leap safely from a tall building, and the entire world can be possessed for a moment's compromise of values. We might note a similar lure in the state lotteries where the odds of winning belong on *Fantasy Island*, yet all of the studies show a high appeal of looking for a way around the real world. Fanaticism about the end-time has a long history of exploiting our fear and frustration with the real world that has contributed to the rejection of the visions of John in Revelation.

I recall the day, on December 10, 1968; the world news reported the deaths of two highly respected Christian writers, Karl Barth and Thomas Merton. My teacher Dale Moody came into class that week with a black-bordered death announcement wired to him from the Barth family. He had studied with Karl Barth in the late 1940's and was viewed as a colleague and friend. But that same day Thomas Merton, a Trappist Monk from a Bardstown, Kentucky, was electrocuted at a conference

in Bangkok, Thailand. Moody spoke to our class that day about the absurdity of life and death. While Karl Barth had lived a long full life and died from natural causes, Merton was taken from us in the prime of life at the age of fifty-three.

The French novelist and secular existentialist Albert Camus had drawn attention to the absurd in life that people living in the real world could not deny, but the question remains, "Is there any hope?" When the careful planning of life is brutally interrupted by death, "Is there any hope?" When the child has been jerked from life before tasting of the experience, "Is there any hope?" These are not new questions. They are the questions of the ages that people of faith are called to face in the hope and love of the eternal God.