

“A Voice in the Wilderness”

A voice in the wilderness . . . that’s what we hear today. Matthew tells us: *“This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”*” John the Baptist was that voice.

But that phrase *“A voice in the wilderness”* conjures up a different kind of vision for our time. It speaks of a person who is sent into an isolated spot, whose voice, loud as he may make it, will not fall on human ears. Being *“a voice in the wilderness”* is akin to *“talking to a brick wall.”* It is feckless speech — nobody is there to listen; nobody to respond.

It’s Advent. John the Baptist shouts, *“People get ready. Your world is about to be rocked.”* Is it a voice you will hear? Is it a voice to which you will listen?

It’s Advent. John the Baptist shouts, *“People get ready. Your world is about to be rocked.”* For you, is that good news or bad? I suppose that the announcement that the world is about to be turned upside down, shattered, rearranged, is good news or bad depending on where you happen to be standing when you get the news.

If your world is happy, pleasant, secure and fixed, if you live within or immediately around my zip code, then John’s announcement that this world is about to shift, may sound as a threat. On the other hand, if you live where the masses of human beings live – in realms of grief, sadness, poverty, distress, or injustice, then Isaiah’s poetic word that a new world is coming is decidedly good news.

What we’ve got here is Bible talk that is known as “apocalyptic.” This is a poetic, biblical vision of the future. Apocalyptic is the way believers do the future.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Albert Schweitzer wrote a book which shook both the church and Bible scholars, and has continued to

shake us: The Quest for the Historical Jesus. One of Schweitzer's contentions was that Jesus, like many Jews of his day, believed that the world was coming to an end in a great cataclysm. God was going to end the world and do it soon. Yet obviously, those predictions were wrong. It didn't happen. Jesus therefore died a disappointed failure of an apocalyptic prophet, said Schweitzer.

The world did not end when the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 CE in Jerusalem. This was just one more in the long, each year becoming longer, story of injustice and tragedy against God's people. The world rumbled right along. Jesus, said many scholars, was wrong in his predictions of the future. German scholar Rudolf Bultmann tried to "existentialize" all of Jesus' apocalyptic talk about "the end," saying that what Jesus meant was that, when he appeared, everything had been thrown into crisis and it was time for a personal decision about him.

Others, I suspect most of us, simply overlooked all of this talk about the end. We prefer to see Jesus as a great moral teacher and ethical example, simply overlooking that a great deal of Jesus' teaching seems to be about the end. Think of all Jesus' parables which speak about the need to be vigilant, to wait for the return of the Master of the household. Recall Jesus' talk about 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. But what are we supposed to do with all this?

This can be particularly embarrassing for the church. Many have noted that most of the New Testament is preoccupied with the problem of the delay of this end. St. Paul told Christians of his day, "*Don't get married. The world is coming to an end quickly. Why entangle yourself in earthly commitments when it's all going to end?*" Both Jesus and St. Paul spoke as if the world was soon coming to an end. But it didn't. So what are we to do now?

Some say that the problem lies in our flat-footed, prosaic, modern reading

of apocalyptic speech. We have taken the colorful, poetic, imaginative language of Jewish apocalyptic and rendered it down into dull prose. Professor John Barton says that when we read Jesus saying something like, *“the sun and the moon shall be darkened and the stars shall not give their light,”* you would think that we know the next line is going to be, *“and the rest of [the country] will have scattered sunshine and intermittent showers.”* We read Isaiah saying that, *“the wolf shall lie down with the lamb,”* and then expect to read, as Woody Allen suggested, *“but the lamb isn’t going to get much sleep.”*

What are contemporary Christians supposed to do with apocalyptic? Apocalyptic language is language about what we would have to call “earth shattering events.” We strain for language to describe such 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, the destruction of the World Trade Center was an “earth shattering event.” No buildings toppled in Cleveland or Akron; there were no fissures in our pavement, but it still felt like something had been badly shaken. Though there may be no great cracks in the earth, an “earth shattering event” is usually more disruptive than even an earthquake, though we are speaking metaphorically.

When, in the book of Daniel, Jewish writers speak of the moon turning red, the clouds descending, angels gathering Israel, they are speaking in metaphors about earth shattering events. They spoke in poetry, which is always more expressive than prose; it is energetic language pushed to the limit. They could have said it more prosaically: *“God’s people are badly oppressed, yet God will soon help us, and when this happens it will be a justice-producing event in which God’s people will at last be set up over all the world.”* Instead, they said it in poetry, because poetry has the power itself to move us to the depths, to shatter, to tear down, to reveal, and thereby to rebuild a world.

So when we read about the Son of Man descending in the clouds, we’re not reading about supernatural events which might take place some other

time and place. Rather we read about “earth shattering events” which take place here in earthly political, military, economic events now. The odd, poetic language is not meant as a secret code to hide things from us, but rather meant to reveal the true theological significance of these events.

When the Civil Rights Bill was signed in 1964, one senator proclaimed, *“This is a great watershed in our age, a sign that a new day is dawning.”* He wasn’t referring to waste water treatment in Washington, nor was he predicting that tomorrow at 6:00 AM the sun would rise in a weird 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. 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.

So when the Old and New Testament writers speak of “the end” of the world, they do so, not meaning that the world would stop in a flash, but rather they meant that we were about to see the end of the way the present world was being run. All those who were in charge of the old world — generals, politicians, priests, who profit from the 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 shaking 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.

This also appears to be very much what Jesus expected — a vast, political-economic turn around which he spoke of as “the end,” when at last the Kingdom of God would be revealed in its fullness. Mary sang about it in her Magnificat at the beginning of Luke’s gospel. Jesus taught about it in so many of his parables. John the Baptist spoke in this way when he announced the arrival of the Christ. *“Repent! The Kingdom of God is coming! Get ready to be purified by the fire of God!”*

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

Jesus did not push out the Romans and set up a new Israel. He was crucified as a criminal, not crowned a King. But after His death and resurrection, the church came to believe that “the end” really had occurred, though perhaps not the way some had believed or hoped. 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” as we know it. In Jesus’ death, the world — the old world — had shown what it was made of: raw power. Any and all hopes for the world that are based on politics, economics, the UN, Amway, IBM, the USA were revealed as ways that lead to the death of God on a cross. The kingdoms of this world pulled out all their stops and did their “best” in nailing Jesus to a cross. And there, they were defeated. Jesus submitted to the world as it is, and in His resurrection unmasked and defeated the old world.

The world did indeed end at Calvary. And a new world began taking place as Jesus’ followers gathered around the table. The world thought it defeated Jesus on Good Friday, but God defeated the world on Easter. Never again would we be able to have faith in any tomorrow produced by us; forever we would be able to believe in God’s power to give us a future worth having.

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 which informed him of the successful drop of the bomb. He turned to a group of soldiers on the battleship and told them, *“This is the greatest news in this history of the world.”* He thought this was the greatest of all great “earth shattering events.” Christians believe that Truman was wrong.

Down through the ages, 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 which the world calls “history” and which we see came to an end at Calvary.

In Jesus, all of this was, is, will be brought to an end so that God's kingdom can be reign. Yet once again today a voice cries out in the wilderness: "*Prepare! That Kingdom is coming soon!*"

For us, is that good news or bad? Can we hear it? Will we listen?

Amen.