

Preaching from Revelation at Easter

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“St. John is a theologian of a particularly attractive type: all his thinking about God took place under fire....”¹

With the approach of the year 2000, ministers will be facing an unprecedented challenge and opportunity for teaching and preaching what we believe and do not believe about apocalypse and the millennium. Culturally, the bombardment has already begun in earnest. To cite but a few examples, there is the film *The Postman* (and others like it) which is set in post-apocalyptic-America; there is John Updike’s latest novel, *Toward the End of Time*; there are numerous scientific/political debates on global warming and the like; there are magazines such as *Newsweek* which preemptively have distributed special issues in the autumn of 1997 on the millennium year 2000; there is the large billboard on Interstate 85 in South Carolina, depicting a hand reaching down out of the clouds with the message, “Jesus is coming soon for a soul near you.” An upsurge in revivalism continues despite the lack of financial accountability and dearth of community mission evident in many of the more “successful” revivals. And there have been the Heaven’s Gate mass suicide episode in California, led by a former mainline seminary student, and the widespread reports of militia movements employing biblical motifs with destructive consequences. Nonfiction books such as Stephen Jay Gould’s *Questioning the Millennium* are receiving major reviews, and the authors are making the talk show rounds. (While Gould is unwittingly doing the church a favor in some of his debunking, his sometimes smug scientism and demeanor are similar to the fundamentalism and patronizing style of a Jerry Falwell or a Pat Buchanan!)

Every congregation will include people who are wrestling with apocalyptic themes. Many of these persons will have been provided little guidance on this subject from their own ministers, and will have attitudes shaped by either popular culture or televised preachers for whom impending disaster sells well. One survey conducted by *Time* magazine and Cable News Network found that twenty percent of adults now believe the end-times will begin sometime around the year 2000, with another thirty-one percent responding that they believe this is possible but were not sure about it.²

This essay will attempt to outline for the preacher (1) a recent resource which considers apocalyptic themes in United States history; (2) an overview of the message of biblical apocalyptic literature; (3) brief comments on the lectionary texts for Easter, Year C, from the Book of Revelation.

Apocalypticism in American Culture

From the beginning the United States has been founded upon several concepts related to apocalyptic thought. These include the belief in special providence for the elect, the destruction of the enemy (including the Native American population), and the establishment of a New Creation, as in the early and recurrent admonitions to be as a “city set upon a hill.” Even Christopher Columbus by 1500 invested the discovery

of the New World with millennial significance. "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John after having spoke of it through the mouth of Isaiah, and he showed me the spot where to find it."³

A valuable resource for the preacher is in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 49:1-2, which includes articles and addresses from the 1994 Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature. This volume is accessible on the Internet at www.uts.columbia.edu., and is titled "Countdown to 2000; Essays on Apocalypticism."

Particularly helpful is an essay by Randall Balmer in which he recounts the mistaken timetables in the prophecies of people such as Charles Taze Russell (Jehovah's Witnesses) and William Miller (the forebear of the Seventh Day Adventists) to point out that the texts of scripture are not meant to be read as accurate chronologies for contemporary history. This should be instructive for those American Christians who have made Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* one of the best-sellers of all-time. Many preachers forget the statement of Jesus that "of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32).

"As 1843 approached, anticipation and enthusiasm among Miller's fifty-thousand followers reached a fever pitch. Preparations for the apocalypse had grown so pervasive that Horace Greeley published an 'extra' edition of the *New York Tribune* on March 2, 1843, to refute William Miller's calculations. Pressed by his followers for a more precise date, Miller declared that the advent would occur sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844....By May 2, 1844, Miller acknowledged his error, but urged his followers to remain vigilant....William Miller himself died lonely and forgotten in 1849, but...today, Miller's theological descendants claim a worldwide following well in excess of three million."⁴

After continuing his survey through the preaching of Dwight L. Moody, Pat Robertson, Charles Colson, and David Koresh, Balmer concludes, "We are venturing now into troubled waters as the twenty-first century approaches. Because Gog and Magog are no longer indisputably the Soviet Union and 'Red' China. . .the apocalyptic preachers are free now to shape the categories, to tap into the culture's free-floating anxieties about pluralism, for instance, about the future, about America's place in the world. There is, I fear, potential for a great deal of mischief in this reconfiguration of apocalyptic prophecies, especially in the hands of demagogues, political or religious (the distinctions are not always clear)."⁵

Also rich in insights is Stephen L. Cook's editorial in *USQR* which suggests three of the positive values in reconsidering apocalyptic theology:

First. . .the apocalyptic texts provide an important corrective against any one-sided existentializing or spiritualizing orientation that fails to reckon with the linear/historical dimensions of the biblical portrayal of God's rule. Moreover, this temporal frame allows theology to address several ontological problems, including the fate of physical reality itself....Second, attention to apocalyptic texts provides an important corrective to misplaced hopes in human progress and evolutionary development....(Apocalyptic texts) have stood as a warning that massive evil will continue as an ever-present threat

in this world. The world is not moving beyond such things as “ethnic cleansing.” Third, the cosmic scope of the apocalyptic texts is instrumental in allowing theology to speak to our modern global existence in a vastly shrunken world. Apocalypticism pioneered the first universal view of history, a view including all peoples and all times....In its inclusion of all peoples, such a vision helps foster peace rather than the nuclear tribalism of the twentieth century. In its inclusion of the entire physical world in its soteriological concern, this vision promotes our active engagement in the current ecological and population crises faced by our planet.⁶

The Message of Apocalyptic Works

Because of widespread ignorance and misunderstandings regarding Revelation and other apocalyptic writings in scripture, the preacher is first faced with an educational task. Easily understood summaries of apocalyptic thought may be found in the “Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature” by Frederick J. Murphy in volume 7 of *The New Interpreters Bible* 6 and in the introduction of M. Eugene Boring’s commentary on *Revelation* in the Interpretation series of commentaries.⁸

Frederick Murphy discerns seven qualities of the apocalyptic genre. First, “all apocalypses are narratives, stories describing the disclosure of otherwise inaccessible secrets to a human seer by a heavenly being. Often the visions themselves are enigmatic and must be interpreted....” Second, “There are two main kinds of apocalyptic narratives. In the first, the seer travels to the heavenly realm or to parts of the cosmos usually inaccessible to human beings. The second type contains no otherworldly journey. This type often incorporates a review of history, culminating in an eschatological crisis and resolution, such as a conflict between the forces of good and evil....” Third, “Apocalyptic revelation has temporal and spatial dimensions” with the spatial aspect dealing with the supernatural world and the temporal aspect concerning cosmic catastrophe and public judgment of all humanity. Fourth, “the element common to all apocalypses is postmortem rewards and punishments.” Fifth, “all Jewish apocalypses and many Christian ones are pseudonymous.” Sixth, “the authority of an apocalypse comes from the seer’s direct reception of revelation.” Finally, “apocalypses do more than convey information or demand specific behavior. They also contain a powerful emotional element that cannot be translated into other terms....Readers can contemplate history as a whole and understand their place in it....They derive hope from the knowledge that as in the mythological combat between the most high God and forces inimical to the divine order, good will be victorious.”⁹

Murphy comments that “what constitutes a crisis may be in the eye of the beholder. What might look like a period of prosperity and peace from the viewpoint of the well-to-do can appear as a time of oppression and suffering to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.” He suggests that according to recent research, “the function of Revelation may have been less to comfort Christians at the onset of a major persecution than to warn them of the demonic nature of the Roman Empire so as to discourage the accommodation to Hellenistic and Roman culture that the author observed going on around him.”¹⁰ For him, apocalyptic preaching seeks to change the perceptions of the hearer, for “to change perception is to change the world” of the hearer.¹¹

M. Eugene Boring believes that the prevalent question for first-century readers of Revelation is the same question facing Christians today. “We too live in a situation

without Christendom, in which the church is once again a minority in a pluralistic world. Even in western countries, where the remnants of Christendom persist, the church is but one voice in a competing pluralistic society.”¹² The contemporary issue of accommodation to culture was foremost in the first-century demand for Caesar worship. Then, as now, there were a number of options being practiced by believers: quit, lie, fight, change the law, adjust, die.¹³

Revelation is an exhortation to the church that Christ has already come, that God is faithful and therefore we must and can stand fast in our confession, and that Christ’s second coming will vindicate the faithful and bring about the defeat of all evil and the inauguration of the New Creation. “The apocalyptists are ‘pessimistic’ about this world, but their ‘pessimism’ is not ultimate. God’s justice will prevail, even though there is no way in *this* world for it to prevail. . . . If there is to be redemption for the world, that is, if God is to be considered faithful, then it must come from God himself if it comes at all. The new Jerusalem is not built up from below but comes down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:2). . . . Apocalyptic is an expression of the faith of the politically powerless and oppressed in a situation where empirical evidence of God’s goodness is not to be seen.”¹⁴

Yet another work which clarifies the meaning of apocalyptic theology is J. Christiaan Beker’s *Paul’s Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Fortress Press, 1982). Beker says that “apocalyptic sentiments are born in a time of ‘failure of nerve’ They are caused by cultural crises and by such stupendous upheavals that our normal ways of perception and control are unable to adjudicate them. . . . *apocalyptic is the product of a severe contradiction between legitimate expectations and reality.* The contradiction experienced between reality and expectations leads in turn to a type of crisis thinking that is no longer capable of mediating positions or rational adjustments but thinks instead in radical absolutes.”¹⁵ Beker concludes that “we must seriously attend to the beckoning power of God’s coming triumph without losing ourselves either in chronological speculations or in a denial of the coming actualization of God’s promise. God’s act in Christ focuses our attention on the present time as an ‘apocalyptic’ time, that is, on the either-or of our allegiance: do we either serve Christ or the powers of this world?”¹⁶

The Apocalyptic Texts of Easter

On first consideration it may be surprising to find texts from Revelation in the Easter cycle, for some would stereotype Revelation as a foreboding work in contrast to the glad news of resurrection. But, the same tension exists in the cycle of Holy Week and in the necessity of Good Friday (the cross) before any Easter (resurrection) can dawn.

Karl Barth held together the death, resurrection, and return of Christ in a remarkable way: “The last time is the time of the world and human history and all men to which a term is already set in the death of Jesus and which can only run towards this appointed end. In the Easter event as the commencement of the new coming of Jesus Christ in revelation of what took place in His life and death, it is also revealed that the time which is still left to the world and human history and all men can only be the last time, that is, time running towards its appointed end. In this sense, the Easter event is the original because the first eschatological event. . . . His final coming to resurrection and judgment is only the completion of what He has begun in His own resurrection and

continued in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ Barth notes that the coming of the kingdom through the apocalypse “will occur when men are least expecting it, beneficially if terrifyingly upsetting all their expectations and plans, and thus their anxieties and hopes, as actually happened in the first instance with the resurrection of Jesus.”¹⁸ Thus there is a congruence between the Gospel texts and the Apocalypse in that people neither expect nor prepare well for resurrection life, yet what initially causes fear and consternation is ultimately grace and beneficence from God.

The lectionary texts for year C include passages from Revelation for the second through the seventh Sundays of Easter. This is an opportune time for the preacher to consider the final book of the Bible in some detail and with some continuity.

The Sunday after Easter is often categorized as “low Sunday.” One teacher of homiletics used to say that a preacher should reserve the “best” sermon for this day, for on Easter Day itself, the music and the memories carry the congregation a long way! Many people arrive on low Sunday with failed nerves and recent or imminent losses, and with internal struggles regarding their faith commitments. Of course in many places, the church has been and is facing imprisonment and persecution. Revelation 1:4-8 is the salutation and introduction of the letter. In fact, it is a good summary of the entire letter. Whatever worshippers bring in their hearts into the sanctuary, the letter reminds the hearer that what we need most— “grace” and “peace”—cannot be manufactured by ourselves but is given. (In the Gospel text, John 20:19-31, the same sort of greeting and gift comes from Jesus to his disciples who were hiding behind locked doors, eventually including the skeptical Thomas.) The letter is radically God-centered, and is an invitation to live, despite fear and persecution, in the eternal presence. God is both at the end and the beginning of life; without the trust concerning the end, hope fails.¹⁹ Here is the first of many uses of the number seven, signifying perfection or completeness—the Spirit has many energies at work for wholeness.

Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza notes that in verses 5-6 there are three titles of Christ and three activities of Christ. He is the faithful witness (Greek word is “martyr”) and so hearers can be confident in their own testimony/martyrdom. He is the firstborn of the dead, and so will guide disciples through their own dying. He is the ruler of kings on earth, (a title taken in the first century by Roman rulers for themselves!), and so will bring the oppressors to judgment. His actions grant love and liberation, and transform the struggling church into a gathering that is both prophetic and priestly.²⁰ Profession of faith is grounded in the prior faith of Jesus. What is at stake in the church is whether the faith will continue to be proclaimed and claimed in the face of persecution and cultural subversion. A letter of Pliny the Younger written in 112 to the Emperor Trajan is chilling: “I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. . . (Some) worshipped your statue and the images of the Gods and cursed Christ.”²¹

The late preacher and teacher Wellford Hobbie put the matter well: “The ultimate question is not whether there is someone or something out there in limitless space whom we call God, but whether there is someone who knows something of the dust of the earth, something of the blood-stained face human existence wears, and can feel for it.”²²

Verses 7-8 in chapter 1 contain the major theme of apocalyptic theology. Charles

Wesley paraphrased these hopes in a powerful hymn, “Lo, He Comes With Clouds Descending.” The imagery of the clouds is often a lingering literalism and stumbling block for modern persons, but the message is the universal triumph of God, a message which may be heard as either threat or promise. Many Orthodox sanctuaries express this in majestic paintings of the Lord (Pantokrator, “ruler of all things”) in the center of the ceiling. Wesley views this as good news, even for “those who jeered and mocked and sold You, pierced and nailed You to the tree. Shamed and grieving, ashamed and grieving, shall their true Messiah see.”²³

The text for the third Sunday of Easter is Revelation 5:11-14. People who have a notion that the population of heaven will be homogeneous and limited have probably never seriously contemplated these verses and their clear vision of universal salvation! Who is at the throne? “Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein!” Easter preaching ought never be dull. At Easter preachers must employ all their powers to make extensive claims in unabashedly lyrical language. William Barclay includes in his commentary on Revelation this reminder from Phillip Carrington: “In the case of the Revelation we are dealing with an artist greater than Stevenson or Coleridge or Bach. St. John has a better sense of the right word than Stevenson; he has a greater command of unearthly supernatural loveliness than Coleridge; he has a richer sense of melody and rhythm and composition than Bach. . . . It is the only masterpiece of pure art in the New Testament. . . . Its fullness and richness and harmonic variety place it far above Greek tragedy.”²⁴

Carlyle Marney, whose thought is now too often neglected scarcely twenty years after his death, knew well the importance of doubt in the dynamics of faith. He could be scathing in his skepticism. But here is the conclusion of his sermon on this text:

Science also talks of mystery now, for the wider the radius of the light we have, the longer the circumference of the circling mystery, especially the mysteries of human existence. . . . The scientists lives, too, by commitment, and all his so-called knowledge is partly subjective always (Polanyi), and he lives, too, with the not yet.

And Christian Faith? It changes too, but it has more reason than ever to keep its little throat-cut Lamb. The Lamb makes more sense—psychologically, psychiatrically, experientially. For all of a sudden we can see that Man with no God cannot remain very manly at all. And Man with no Lamb is caught in a meaningless existence. Let us therefore believe and cry:

Worthy the Lamb, the one Slain! From the foundations of the Earth

For the symbols our Fathers loved but could not translate now make more sense than they knew.

I am sick of slick presentations that evade the issue. They keep saying, whether resurrection is so or not, we have this, and this, and this, and moral incentive as an effect of whatever resurrection was or was not, is or is not. Piffle! I want it all! Let us trust our future as well as our origins. Let us buy the whole package.

I believe in the Resurrection of the dead! I believe in the Resurrection from among the bodily dead! Worthy Is The Lamb That Was Slain!²⁵

The fourth Sunday of Easter continues with Revelation 7:9-17, the uniting of the faithful martyr-Lamb with those who have come out of the great tribulation. Marney's sermon is again suggestive: "This is the consummation that all suffering demands....But this is also consummation for Ivan Dostoevski's complaint with any God there may be that he cannot stand the suffering of all the innocent. Nor can I stand it well. The Lamb with its throat cut says that God cannot stand it either....The Consummation is offered to all who ever cried out for God to show his Justice in the teeth of our sufferings and deaths. For all these, he shows us a Lamb, the one slain, the one throat cut, and a single adjective—WORTHY!...I cannot tell you why he is worthy. You must say. You must tell me. Then we could tell each other why the Lamb is so worthy. And who is the Lamb? Perhaps here a clue offers itself. For is he not every innocent sufferer along with some of us guilty sufferers, caught up in the Matchless One, the Lamb, throat cut? The Church did well to close the canon of scripture with The Revelation. Handel followed suit to close *Messiah*...."²⁶

The Easter cycle ends with the two readings just before Pentecost coming from the final two chapters of Revelation, the familiar passages read so often beside the grave alongside grieving yet hopeful people. The final picture of humanity is a rescued and redeemed flock for whom all things are new and with whom there is no more crying, death, pain, or mourning. A modern impressionistic poet has captured the essence beautifully:

One day people will touch and talk perhaps easily,
And loving be natural as breathing and warm as sunlight,
And people will untie themselves, as string is unknotted,
Unfold and yawn and stretch and spread their fingers,
Unfurl, uncurl like seaweed returned to the sea,
And work will be simple and swift as a seagull flying,
And play will be casual and quiet as a seagull settling,
And the clocks will stop—and no one will wonder or care or notice,
And people will smile without reason, even in winter, even in rain.²⁷

The prayer by John Henry Cardinal Newman in the *Book of Common Worship* would be a fitting means of ending the sermons on the texts from Revelation. "Support us, Lord, all the day long...." For we may never have peace, until the very last. But then it is assured, a gift, as always.

Apocalyptic texts demand an investment of discipline and creative effort, perhaps moreso than most sections of scripture. But let the preacher make the attempt with joy, for Revelation is at heart not so much foreboding as it is filled with assurance and hope for the church. The Apocalypse is not unlike the music of calypso, which began with poor and exploited and oppressed people in Trinidad, and which is "characterized by wrenched syllabic stress and syncopated rhythms."²⁸ When all the bananas have been stacked and tallied, and the deadly tarantula is left behind on the pier, "daylight come and me want to go home."²⁹

Come, Lord Jesus!

- ¹ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco Harper, 1998), 4
- ² Quoted in Stephen L. Cook, "Reflections on Apocalypticism at the Approach of the Year 2000," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 49 1-2, at www.uts.columbia.edu (no pages given)
- ² Quoted in Randall Balmer, " 'Thy Kingdom Come' Apocalypticism in American Culture," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 49 1-2, at www.uts.columbia.edu (no pages given)
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ Stephen L. Cook, Ibid Readers also may wish to review John S. McClure, "Preaching, Eschatology, and World View" in *Journal for Preachers* 13 (Advent, 1989) 2-10
- ⁷ Frederick J. Murphy, "Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature," vol. 7 of *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville Abingdon, 1996), 1-16
- ⁸ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 1-62
- ⁹ Murphy, 2-3
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 7
- ¹¹ Ibid
- ¹² Boring, 60
- ¹³ Ibid, 21-23
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 42
- ¹⁵ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 22-23
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 118
- ¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (IV, 3, 290-96) Reprinted in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics A Selection*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 236-245
- ¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (III, 2, 493-511) Reprinted in Karl Barth, *Preaching through the Christian Year*, ed. John McTavish and Harold Wells (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, Ltd., 1978), 267
- ¹⁹ Fred Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary Year C – Lent, Holy Week, and Easter*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 165 See also Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching A Lectionary Commentary*, 3 volumes, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993)
- ²⁰ Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation Justice and Judgment*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 71-73
- ²¹ Ibid, 193 The full text is also in Boring, 14-15
- ²² F. Wellford Hobbie, *Proclamation 3 Easter, Series C*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 26-27
- ²³ Charles Wesley, "Jesus Comes With Clouds Descending" is Hymn 6 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990)
- ²⁴ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 2
- ²⁵ Carlyle Marney, *The Coming Faith* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 133-134
- ²⁶ Ibid, 131-132
- ²⁷ I regret that I do not know the author or source of this poem which I copied from a liturgical resource several years ago
- ²⁸ Webster's New World Dictionary (Nashville: The Southwestern Company, 1974), 106
- ²⁹ "Day-O," a West Indian folk song popularized by Harry Belafonte in the 1960's, reprinted in *Songs*, ed. Yohann Anderson (San Anselmo: Songs and Creations, Inc., 1989), 73