**What Are We Waiting For?**

**Matthew 24:36-44
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November 27, 2022**

We come to the beginning of the church year today and, as always, enter Advent through the apocalyptic portal. We do this to lift the veil and clear our sightlines on the world in which we live. Technically, *apocalypse* means something is being revealed or a veil is being parted. *Eschaton* is the word that means end times and eschatology is the study of endings. And Armageddon is a big and final battle.

In the Bible, the apocalyptic is no more than a literary form. Yale Divinity School professor, John Collins is a leading scholar on the apocalyptic as a genre of communication common to some parts of the ancient world, notably Persia and Babylonia. We find it in Daniel, parts of Isaiah, and Revelation. And small portions also made its way into the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus.

As a literary form, it was an imaginative and exaggerated storytelling that took elements from current events and amplified the destruction, chaos, and fear in the story order to demonstrate God’s amazing and faithful power to save; in the simplest terms it teaches, if God can save us from this worst case scenario, God can surely save us from this less dire reality. It is very much like the amplified plot lines of superhero movies. In the movies, the tension builds as the powers of evil wreak havoc until it seems all is lost; it is then the Avengers or Justice League, or Ironman or Thor save the day. So we also enter Advent across the apocalyptic because it is also imaginative; we already know Christmas, it is the Second Coming of Christ for which we wait with wonder. Whether we speak of God’s salvation or Jesus return, it is, in Catherine Keller’s words “the moment of truth with cosmic excitement” (Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 1).

Now, here’s the thing, I know I’m right on the definitions and etymology but I find across the internet and throughout our culture that the word apocalypse is overwhelmingly understood to mean the intertwining of all three concepts: revelation, the end times, and a cataclysmic battle between good and evil. According to Keller’s research, this ancient style of writing has become an “unconscious matrix of ” the modern mind and she refers to this matrix as an “apocalyptic habit” of the mind.

In *Apocalypse Now and Then*, Keller wrote:

This pattern, always adjacent to the suffering, rests upon an either/or morality: a proclivity to think and feel in polarities of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’; to identify with the good and to purge the evil from oneself and one’s world once and for all, demanding undivided unity before ‘the enemy’; to feel that the good is getting victimized by the evil, which is diabolically overpowering; to expect some cataclysmic showdown in which, despite tremendous collateral damage … good must triumph in the near future with the help of the new world. Because the pure and permanent state of the desired identity and its community can never be achieved, such scripts are characterized by an explosive futurism (Keller, 11).

Keller saw all of this back in 1996 when she stated in the first person, “I am talking about a habituated and reactive tendency, collectively installed and readily acted out in individual bursts of self-righteous certainty: we may ‘do an apocalypse’ in our most intimate relationships as well as our most visionary politics” (11).

This resonates with me when I think of the way images of civilians in camo and body armor from the 2017-gun rights rally in Charlottesville, Virginia invade my thoughts as a harbinger/omen (an annunciation) of things to come. And then it did appear again in the attack on the Capital. Like the build-up of tanks on Russia’s border with Ukraine, we each carry our own images from the last year or decades that haunt our ability to have hope.

The apocalyptic as revelation will always be a part of human life and has the potential to be either positive or negative, good or evil. When a loved one dies, it is the end of the world as we had known it. That is apocalypse or a lifting of the veil. However, as the idea of revelation has been entwined with expectations of chaos, destruction, and end times, it has affected the human mindset and blurred God’s will from human will. Its built-in sliding scale of hope has been skewed toward hopelessness.

Catherine Keller wrote her book for the academic community with the intent of poking holes in our cultural and world-wide apocalyptic habit. We are not called to fix it but can work with our own thoughts. Perhaps we will have opportunities in conversations to poke a hole or two to help deflate this mis-reading of scripture and its bent toward violence.

One thing I have been wrestling with for a number of months is this, when we at HOH announce member deaths via email and in the bulletin, we record the earthly death date as the time of their entry into the Church Triumphant. This beautiful language is pre-Reformation but part of a larger label. Early in Christian history, the church gained a tri-fold identity: the Church Militant, the Church Penitent, and in death it is the Church Triumphant.

The Church Penitent, also known as the Church Suffering or the Church Expectant, was associated with purgatory and the work of getting into heaven. So of course, these were not adopted by the Reformers. The Church Militant has done a tremendous amount of good in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this same church has faltered and sown some violence and a lot pf confusion in the world.

When I was in Sunday school, I joined my classmates in singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” as we recessed from our assembly time by way of the offering plate and went into our age designated classrooms. Though not encouraged toward any violence, I was taught to be a soldier for Christ; for some congregations or denominations the metaphor had lost its meaning–but not all. “Love one another as I have loved you,” is not a message that can be delivered in a militant fashion. We too have some shifting to do, some new avenues of faith sharing and community building to explore.

There was another name in the ancient formula for the church on earth and that is the Church Pilgrim. I admit it is the third time this week I’ve brought it up but pilgrims and pilgrimage, but it just keeps appearing. Pilgrims are seekers, people looking for a place of resurrection and for God’s will. And this is important because the number of scholars who consider the biblical book of Revelation to be an apocalyptic writing about a past event, possibly the destruction of the temple in 70 BCE, is growing. Most Armageddons are human made like the destruction Putin in bringing to Ukraine even as we speak.

So, we start the church year through the apocalyptic portal to remove the veil and clear our sightlines on ourselves and the world in which we live.

We start the church year through the apocalyptic portal so we might ask ourselves, what if the visions of Revelation and the “apocalyptic habit” it teaches are not our future but the haunting of the past.

We come through the apocalyptic door to break the cultural misalignment called here an “apocalyptic habit” and to see the broad difference between buying into Armageddon and the long, slow work of loving our neighbor.

We come through this portal with heightened awareness of the need to ask God to heal the generational DNA that keeps us in the “apocalyptic habit” and then be open to that healing.

We use this entrance as pilgrims seeing that God’s method of revelation is annunciation, agreement, gestation, quickening, and the birth pangs of new life.

Keep awake, keep watching:

We are living through incremental and convergent change; though we have witnessed words and actions we never thought would happen on our soil, it is not our vision for the future, Christ is. Climate change and the world’s refugees will take an overwhelming amount of our resources and energy when we can find enough stability to turn our wholehearted efforts in those directions. There is every earthly reason to think about the *echaton* and even Armageddon but, in God, the “the moment of truth with cosmic excitement” just about to break through.

God is our hope – we are waiting and listening for the advent of God. May it be so. Amen.