**Jesus is Coming: Look Busy!** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Saint Paul, Minnesota November 19, 2023

In 2018, two Minnesota novelists took their readers into *dystopian worlds.* In each novel, a contemporary young woman from *Minneapolis* must deal with the end of civilization as we know it. Each woman has an undefined relationship with the father of her child. Each refers often to the Christian faith—one having recently embraced it while the other has rejected it. And each one must flee when others want the child she’s carrying.

The first novelist, *Louise Erdrich,* is one of our country’s *greatest living storytellers* and the award-winning author of 16 novels. In this book, titled, *Future Home of the Living God,* her heroine, 26-year-old *Cedar*, is the adopted child of a loving couple of *“idealistic liberals.”* Newly pregnant, she must decide how to tell her parents her news and what to do about her lack of health care and an undefined relationship with the baby’s father. She is part Native American, and when her Ojibwe birth mother makes contact, Cedar drives to see her, hoping to establish ties for the baby’s sake and ask about any genetic concerns in the family history.

Meanwhile, on the radio and Internet are warnings of an *impending reproductive catastrophe.* Mutant genes are manifesting themselves in insects and animals. Odd, regressive traits are seen in newborns. People are panicking. When the government begins to round up pregnant women who may be carrying the last normal fetuses, *Cedar* goes into hiding and begins writing a journal for her unborn child, a chronicle of *“a world running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways.”*

At the same time, she is working on the next issue of Zeal, a Catholic magazine that she founded after converting to Catholicism. She decides to *“examine the breadth of thought on how Christ’s divinity was made flesh. What could resonate more with what is happening right now? Now that it appears we might be losing our own spark of divinity, our consciousness, our souls?”* The title of the novel points to Cedar’s unshakable—or utterly naïve—belief in God’s presence amid the disaster and in spite of threats to her unborn baby.

Whereas Erdrich takes on the *chaos* of a world on the brink, *Kaethe Schwehn,* in *The Rending and the Nest,* simplifies things: in her novel, the *apocalypse* has already happened. *Mira* is one of the 5 percent of the population that has survived. Three years earlier she left her ten-year-old brother, *Bim,* in a mall’s amusement park and went across the hall to shop for a necklace. In a flash, her brother and most of the world’s humans disappeared. A few of the survivors were touching someone during the flash and came into the postapocalyptic world with that person. Mira, who woke up with a necklace in her hand, is haunted by a *“what if?”* What if her brother had been holding her hand? Would he still be alive?

Minnesota is now a scarred landscape with no commerce, communication systems, electricity, or plumbing. Mira lives in Zion, a small community with rules about sharing, security, and hosting the *“visitors”* who wander in from Highway 39. When they’re not scrambling to feed and clothe themselves, the Zion­ites occasionally try to make sense of what happened. Was *the Rending* (named for the moment when Jesus died, and the curtain was torn) a climate disaster? Perhaps it was the *Rapture*—though the survivors seem no more wicked or saintly than those who are gone.

Survivors seek meaning and comfort in a variety of ways. At first, some participate in Christian communion, but *“there was no bread and there was no wine and the substitutes . . . felt wrong on the tongue. And besides . . . there wasn’t anyone to lead them, and Christians like a good shepherd.”* Some follow Mira’s friend *Lana* in a daily yoga routine. Others visit *Chester,* who listens without judgment, then hands each visitor a *“fortune”—*a quote cut from a popcorn popper manual, a list of crossword clues, or a pamphlet on vaccination side effects. Zionites know the quotes are nonsense, but they return for more. Chester is the closest thing to a chaplain that they have.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I share this with you because *apocalyptic literature* has been popular with humans across cultures and historical periods, but especially with *Jews and Christians*. *Apocalypse* simply means *“unveiling.”* Since the idea of gradual change wasn’t a common concept in the ancient world, this literary form was originally intended to reveal a *hopeful* vision for people. Progress was seen as a series of *ages,* one after the other, that changed rapidly.

For example, in Hebrew thought, there are three *“ages”*: 1) Original Paradise, 2) the cursed world, and 3) The Messianic kingdom. An “apocalypse” was therefore the Hebrew way of expressing *hope* for the victory of God and the triumph of righteousness. (This is what we see in today’s first reading from the prophet Zephaniah).

Then, as Christians entered the story, they took over that phrasing of *expectancy* and aimed it squarely at the oppressive rule of Rome. While the New Testament is aglow with *“Christ is coming!”* the notion of the *second coming* was, for early Christians, a very specific way of expressing *hope* in overcoming their suffering under the heel of empire. In other words, it was essentially *resistance literature* hiding the promise of *triumph* in fantastical images and language. For instance, the *“end,”* as announced in the book of Revelation, is *not*  the end of the world, *but* the end of the Roman Empire! (Take heed, present day imperial powers!).[[2]](#footnote-2) These themes are *echoed* in our second reading from 1st Thessalonians.

Unfortunately, the historical and political implications of apocalyptic literature in the Bible are lost on most contemporary readers—which has led to some exceptionally bad (and uniquely American) ideas that we call the Rapture or *Rapture Theology* (a word or phrase that is never actually used in the Bible!).

You see, over the last 150 years, *countless millions* have been caught up in various forms of Rapture Theology. Scripture, torn from its context, is manipulated as a weapon of fear and intimidation. For example, an offended God is portrayed as being out for *vengeance—*and people are encouraged to embrace a self-centered satisfaction in being personally *“saved”* at the expense of the suffering and death of family, friends, and neighbors.

New Testament scholar, Barbara Rossing, writes: *“The Rapture vision invites a selfish nonconcern for the world. It turns salvation into a personal 401(k) plan that saves only yourself.”[[3]](#footnote-3)* Meanwhile, a ravaging warrior Jesus is preparing to return to violently punish those who aren’t the right kind of believers. Best get right or be *“left behind.”*

Unconsciously drawing on the dualism of *Zoroastrianism* and the *Manichaeism* declared a heresy by the early church, the Rapture proponents believe that the world is *evil* and that the righteous must escape before a vengeful God destroys it.

It would be one thing if this were just bad theology embraced by a harmless fringe. But, in fact, it has become so influential that it is affecting public policy and international relations. For instance, (in this view) the faithful are relieved of any need to be concerned for the *environment* or any other aspect of the world; for in the course of their personal salvation, the earth and all the evils therein will be destroyed.

But here is the problem: *rapture theology is completely at odds with the teachings of Jesus.* Ask yourself: *How could one who practiced nonviolence and compassion denounce his core values and embrace brute force, violence, and vengeance?* It is simply *inconceivable* that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ would resort to retribution. In fact, it is more than inconceivable; it is *unbelievable.*

John Dominic Crossan put it this way:

*“No Jew would think about ending the world because the world is God’s creation and according to Genesis 1 is all good. God would never end the world. And of course they don’t think* ***they*** *could do it, like we know* ***we*** *can do it. What they want God to do is end evil and injustice and violence on this earth. So eschatology is the hope that God will overcome someday, as it were. (And) if you talk about apocalyptic eschatology that would be somebody who says, ‘Well, I have a revelation from God that it’s going to be soon. Maybe next week, maybe in our lifetime, God is finally going to clean up the world.’ It’s like a great spring cleaning of the world. So what Jesus is saying and what Paul is saying is the great spring cleaning is not just imminent, it has already started. That’s the novelty, the creativity, of Christian faith. They’re not saying it’s coming soon. They’re saying it has already begun. And they are saying it’s going to be over soon—they were wrong on the second one by 2,000 years and counting.* ***But*** *the first one is the heart of Christian faith. Do you believe it has begun? And what are you doing to get with the program?”*

I’m wondering this morning: what are you (what are we) doing to get with the program?

Here is an example of a kind of Christianity that is more in tune with the teachings of Jesus—it’s called the *Social Gospel* (or what I call mainstream, historic Christianity!)*.*

You see, the Social Gospel was (and is!) a Christian movement that emerged in late 19th-century America as a response to the *obscene levels of inequality* in a rapidly industrializing country. Its adherents took on the exploitation of workers and unethical business practices of [robber barons](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/robberbarons.asp#:~:text=%22Robber%20baron%22%20is%20a%20term,Rockefeller.) like oil magnate [John D. Rockefeller](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/John_D._Rockefeller), who, when once asked by a reporter how much money he needed to finally have enough, purportedly [said](https://www.cnbctv18.com/views/how-much-money-is-enough-just-a-little-bit-more-8800361.htm), *“Just a bit more.”*

The Social Gospel turned religion into a means for economic and political reform (and was embraced by many across the political spectrum). Its message*: saving people from slums was just as important as saving them from hell.* At its peak, the movement’s leaders (such as Theodore Roosevelt and Walter Rauschenbusch) supported campaigns for eight-hour workdays, the breaking up of corporate monopolies and the abolition of child labor. They spoke from pulpits, lectured across the country, and wrote best-selling books.

And today, current leaders carrying the Social Gospel torch have helped shape debates around everything from health care and minimum wage to attitudes toward the poor.

Sen. Warnock, for example, [cites](https://www.statesboroherald.com/local/warnock-frames-quest-equal-access-health-care-gospel-call-service/) Matthew 25, where Jesus says people will be judged by what they do for *“the least of these,”* to argue for expanding Medicaid to recalcitrant states. In doing this, he is walking in the theological steps of the Social Gospel.

When the Rev. William Barber, the founding director of the Yale Divinity School‘s [Center for Public Theology and Public Policy](https://theologyandpolicy.yale.edu/), ties issues like climate change, immigration, and voter suppression to his Christian faith, he is evoking the Social Gospel.

But perhaps the most surprising place to find the Social Gospel is in the work of an Ivy League professor who is changing the way we look at poverty in America. [Matthew Desmond](https://matthewdesmondbooks.com/) is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *“*[*Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City.”*](https://evictedbook.com/) and *“*[*Poverty, by America*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/13/books/review/poverty-by-america-matthew-desmond.html)*.”*

In his books Desmond argues that poverty is not the result of an individual’s moral failures but the result of a system in which *“keeping some citizens poor serves the interests of many.”* He also has said the US government has the resources to eliminate poverty.

*“I want to end poverty, not reduce it,”* he said in one [interview.](https://www.csmonitor.com/Books/Author-Q-As/2023/0428/Matthew-Desmond-has-a-message-US-poverty-is-immoral) *“I don’t want to treat it; I want to cure it.”*

Perhaps it’s not surprising that Desmond is the son of a pastor. His books and interviews are filled with scriptural references that could be taken right out of a Social Gospel sermon from the late 19th century.

During another recent [interview,](https://faithandleadership.com/matthew-desmond-the-will-end-poverty) Desmond said the moral outrage that’s characteristic of his work reflects his faith.

*“I feel like often, throughout the Scriptures, when you see God getting really angry, it’s because some disadvantaged group is getting screwed,”* he said*. “It’s like Isaiah 61:8 — ‘I, the Lord, hate robbery. I hate injustice. I love justice.’ This kind of righteous hate is something that I try to channel.”*

But what’s unsettling is that so many of the issues that early Social Gospel leaders battled are plaguing America again a century later. According to John Blake, there is a [shocking](https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/15/business/top-1-wealth-oxfam-davos/index.html) concentration of wealth at the top, courts and [corporations](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/technology/amazon-unions-virginia.html) are crushing worker’s rights, and [exploitive child labor](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/30/economy/child-labor-louisiana-texas/index.html) — once seen as an [appalling vestige of the past](https://www.history.com/news/child-labor-lewis-hine-photos) — has returned to parts of the US.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Friends, with this in mind, I’ll leave you with these thoughts:

Insofar as one perceives the mystery of the Divine as the benevolent *ground of all being* and that this mystery has been revealed in Jesus, ***then*** there is nothing to fear from the ravings of apocalyptic preachers and authors. *Our call* continues to be one of offering an alternative to the fear and violence embraced by certain parts of American religion. Zephaniah, Paul, Jesus, and many others remind us of our responsibility of bearing *hope* and *reconciliation* to a troubled world—doing our part to bring healing to the nations, by serving those who are most in need. *That’s* the way of Jesus—and where the church needs to be today and always.

1. Debra Benis, *What Happens After You Survive an Apocalypse?* The Christian Century, February 28, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David M. Felten and Jeff Proctor-Murphy, *Living the Questions: the Wisdom of Progressive Christianity,* Harper One, New York, 2012, p. 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation,* Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 2004, pp. 1-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Blake, *There’s Another Christian Movement That’s Changing Our Politics. It Has Nothing to do with Whiteness or Nationalism,* CNN, November 13th, 2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)