

“A Different Ending” GPPC 12-3-17
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

If you're willing, I invite you to close your eyes right now for just a few seconds. I'm going to say a word, and when I say it, please notice the images that come to your mind. Ready? The word is apocalypse.

Apocalypse. Now open your eyes. What did you imagine? Did you see bombs raining down to create a nuclear apocalypse and the dreary barren landscape of nuclear winter? Or did you imagine an apocalypse created by natural events—devastating earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, tornados, volcanos, oh my? Or maybe, since we're in church after all, apocalypse made you think of the turbulent, practically psychedelic, end-of-time images we find in the Bible. What did you imagine?

In biblical understanding the word “apocalypse” means to reveal or unveil. Often it points toward the revealing and unveiling that will come at the end of time, especially with the second coming of Christ to complete God's rein of justice and love. And, yes, sometimes the images seem wild and threatening. In Mark's gospel Jesus says, “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be

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falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

Well, after that, it’s kind of hard to ask, “And where are we going for lunch today after worship?”

The point of the language of apocalypse is to make clear that what is coming is not a slight adjustment of life, not a tweaking of our calendared plans but something that shakes the universe and pretenders to God’s authority, something that signals a new age, a new life, something cosmic. And so even reading and talking about apocalypse is to be shaken as we acknowledge just how transitory are our lives, how little we actually control, and how, despite all appearances to the contrary, ultimately God’s reign of justice, mercy, and love is assured of coming.

But today in the reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul offers an ending that is just as real, just as cosmic as the scary sounding apocalyptic passages in the Bible. But this ending has a different tone.

Paul is writing to the Corinthian church around 54 A.D., a little more than twenty years after the death of Jesus. Paul’s letter probably will be read aloud in worship by the gathered church in Corinth.

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As he always does in speaking to the churches he helps to lead, Paul begins his letter with a formal greeting that signals his love for the church and God's love and provision for the church too. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

And then here Paul immediately moves to good news not only for the Corinthian church but for us. He says, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, because in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you..."

In other words, in this letter though Paul will offer plenty of critique for the Corinthian church (as he does for every church he helps to lead) he is first of all *thankful* for the church.

Notice Paul does not make the mistake, so fashionable these days, of trendy but cynical church "leaders" who dismiss the flawed church and advise members to abandon the church. "Secede from the church," they say. "Go off and be spiritual on your own, (and subscribe to my cool blog while you're at it)." But Paul does not take that click bait. He

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never dismisses the church, because he loves the church with all its blemishes and flaws.

Beyond its blemishes and flaws, Paul sees something else. He says, “For in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind...”

Do you notice what Paul is saying not just to the Corinthian church but to the church in every age? He is saying, “God’s grace in Christ Jesus has been given to you, and you have all that you need to be faithful today.”

Now maybe we want to say, “Wait a minute, Paul, you poor benighted soul, confined to the 1st century. You don’t understand this 21st century congregation. We’re struggling to meet the budget. The building needs yet another expensive repair. We wish we had more people in worship. Our prayer lives could use some work. Outreach is steady, but it’s not easy; there’s so much need. And like all congregations, we care for one another, yet we also squabble.”

But Paul says, “That’s what you see on the surface. But this is not merely about you, your efforts, your smarts, and your vision. This is

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about God, what God is doing through you, in you, and sometimes in spite of you. And you have all you need to be faithful today.”

We have all we need to be faithful today. “Give us this day our daily bread...” And God says, “Very well.” We have all we need for today.

And we can also be confident about something else. Paul says you are “not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In plain English what is Paul saying to the church? He’s saying, “You have all you need for today. And you also *will* have all you need as you wait and live in expectation for the end of time and Christ’s coming again in judgment, mercy, and love. In fact, you’ll be blameless.”

And maybe we say, “Blameless? Um, Paul. I’m pretty sure I committed a bunch of grouchy sins just trying to get to church on time this morning. And that’s just this morning. Check my sin tab for a week,

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a month, a year, a lifetime. Now we're getting into a serious accumulation of sin, my friend. Blameless? Ha!"

But remember Paul originally writes to an imperfect Corinthian church. As a couple of Bible scholars put it, "Paul is writing to people who have already engaged in quarrels, nourished scandalous conduct, doubted some of the basic elements of the gospel, questioned the authority of the apostle, and threatened to go off into extravagant fanaticism. On occasion they have driven Paul to tears, yet here he states unconditionally that they will be blameless in the final evaluation. . . those who believe in God's forgiveness will have nothing against them *at the end.*" (William F. Orr and James Arthur Walthur, *1 Corinthians*, 146.)

Do you believe that? Do you believe that? I do. Even though I watch TV and read the newspaper and scan Facebook and the Internet and feel sad about the litany of injustice couched as victory and violence defended as necessary. And even though I know more than enough about my own failings and the failings of other people of faith and the failings of people of no faith they can name, I still believe that God's love is victorious in the end. It makes sense to me, because if evil finally

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wins the day, then nothing makes sense. It makes sense to me that in the end we meet God in Christ who is rational, forgiving, and loving. And God's love wins.

And I still believe in God's grace that is God's forgiveness and God's gifts, for *this* day *and* for the final day whenever it may be. Otherwise, I could not get up in the morning. And I could not come and stand before you with the word that is our *official* word for this first Sunday in Advent, a banner word indeed, hope. Live in trust. Live in hope.

Hope. ©Jeff Paschal