

First Sunday in Advent  
December 3, 2017

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**Revelation 1:7-8, 12-18**  
**Mark 13:24-27, 32-33**

### **Deeply Rooted in Hope**

Doug Meyer worked in a radio station when he was an undergrad back in the days before computers. It was a small operation where the DJs also read the news that came across on those old teletype machines that constantly clattered away.



Orion Nebula, NGC 1980

What Doug remembers best about those teletype machines was that they had bells in them, bells that the broadcaster could hear faintly even in the broadcast booth. The bells signaled something important coming over the wire. Each machine had a typed list taped to it explaining what each series of bells meant:

- One or two rings signaled breaking news.
- Three or four rings meant a severe storm or tornado.
- Five or six rings meant a major event: an accident or disaster like a plane crash.
- Seven or eight rings meant a national situation, attack, threat or emergency

Under the last entry someone had written in longhand, fifteen rings means “Cubs win the World Series.”<sup>i</sup>

Now *that* has actually happened! These apocalyptic verses and visions of the Bible sound very different today, entirely different from the way we heard them back in the days when Doug Meyers was reading the news off a teletype machine. Now we see news of earthquakes, floods, war, and rumors of war, constantly on our news feeds. Our phones announce hurricanes, tornadoes and tsunamis, despotism, nuclear threats, terrorist attacks, and mass shootings nearly every day.

What does it all mean?

Maybe it’s simple math—there are exponentially more of us alive today -- double the human population of just 50 years ago. That means that we have twice the opportunity to break the planet, extinguish other species and harm and kill each other than we did just 50 years ago. It’s hard to wrap your head around just how fast Earth’s population is growing – from 1.6 billion in 1900 to 6.1 billion by 2000. The United Nations projects that the population will double again in the next 75 years.<sup>ii</sup>

Maybe it is as Tom Freidman said -- the world is Hot, Flat and Crowded.

And maybe it's more than that. Maybe it's time for Christ's return. We need his help, don't you think? Will it be soon? Jesus said that we need to be ready. Pay attention! Prepare. Listen to Jesus speaking to his disciples in the Gospel reading from Mark, chapter 13 beginning at verse 24.

*“But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

*Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.<sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.<sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: God of hope, you brought love into this world, be the love that dwells in us and between us. Always, and particularly this Advent season we pray: Come, Lord Jesus. Open our hearts and our minds that we may hear the word that you have for us to hear today. Amen.

Ted Wardlaw is the president of Austin Theological Seminary, one of twelve, fine Presbyterian Church, (USA) seminaries. Recently Ted had a flight from Atlanta to Austin. Waiting at the gate at Hartsfield-Jackson he saw the gate agent grab her microphone and tell everyone that their flight was overbooked. Ted knew it was coming. He could guess from the way people were crammed into the gate area. Who was willing to give up their seats? Take a later flight? “Please gate check your carry-ons,” she said. Then she asked (this was a Delta flight):

“Y’all, what is going on in Austin, anyway?”

In his head Ted started scrolling through the times and dates of Austin’s many art, music and film festivals, trying to account for the size of the crowd, but before he could come up with an answer, a man with an umbrella, a tweed hat, and a bow tie stood up and announced proudly,

“The National Entomological Society of America is having its annual convention in Austin this week.” He went on: “Folks, we’re the bug people, and we’re headed for Austin!”

A few people laughed, others clapped and cheered, and Ted thought how much the guy *looked* like an entomologist. As he boarded the plane he started to laugh thinking about the idea of crossing the country with “the bug people” who were about to invade Austin.<sup>iii</sup>

The invasion of the Bug People would rate at least 8-bells on Doug Meyer's teletype machine. Wonder how many bells Jesus coming on the clouds would get? Both of the texts for this morning speak of the return of Christ – the risen Christ coming on the clouds with great power and glory. Scholars call this kind of language apocalyptic, that is, revealing the events of the end of the world.

Here's how one contemporary artist imagines that day.

Apocalyptic writing uses a particular kind of vocabulary employing oversized and vivid images to paint a dramatic, larger-than-life picture of the future.



The 15<sup>th</sup> century Flemish artist, Hans Memling painted St. John's vision. Here is Michelangelo's masterpiece. This is his vision of The Last Judgement that towers over the altar of the Sistine Chapel. Intense, dramatic, vivid.

Painters love these apocalyptic verses, though not nearly as much as filmmakers do. I've lost count of all the movies and television versions of the apocalypse. Name a way to end the world, and I can almost guarantee that Hollywood has filmed it -- from vampires and zombies, to meteors and viruses, to animal and alien and insect invasions; we have seen them all.



There was a movie last year called *Interstellar*. Matthew McConaughey played an astronaut turned farmer who is sent by NASA through a wormhole to find a habitable planet for Earth's inhabitants, after Earth's environment is gradually destroyed. A few years ago, that whole notion seemed entirely unbelievable. But now...

There's something important to remember about apocalyptic language, in scripture as well as in art and literature. Apocalyptic speech and art always rises out of struggle and crisis. Tom/Tim just read to us from the Book of Revelation, the longest apocalypse in the Bible. John of Patmos

(sometimes he's called John the Divine, or John the Revelator) shares a vision that is full of dramatic images of angels and dragons and a picture of the risen Christ with a two-edged sword coming out his mouth. Some people find this frightening or just too strange. But remember, this is the way people talk in times of crisis, when life seems hopeless; when chaos reigns, when everything we thought was solid and predictable becomes fragile and fleeing.

In the case of our gospel reading from Mark, the crisis was the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Four years earlier, in 66AD, the Jewish party of the Zealots led a revolt against the occupying Roman army and killed a battalion of Roman soldiers. The Emperor Nero sent troops to put an end to the uprising. While the residents of Jerusalem were busy squabbling and fighting among themselves, Titus, the Roman commander, who would later become Emperor, and Tiberius Julius Alexander surrounded the city with three legions on the western side, and one on the Mount of Olives in the east. By September of 70 AD they had laid waste to the city, destroying everything, including Herod's magnificent Temple. Worship ceased in the Temple, and it has not resumed to this day.

No wonder Mark warned his readers to be on guard and look for the signs of things to come. "Beware, keep alert...watch." Jesus said. That's solid advice. "About the day or the hour no one knows."

In the part of the world where I come from, language of apocalypse is often used to threaten or frighten potential converts, but that's not really its purpose, not even close. The language of the Second Coming of Christ is written in intense, vivid language in order to grab our attention and wake us up; like the bumper sticker I saw one day when I was stuck in traffic on Ritchie Highway. It asked,

"Is *this* what you want to be doing when Jesus comes back?"

If these words are like bells that startle us out of our routine-induced coma, then that's a good thing. But first and foremost, they are meant to be a word of hope, to keep us deeply rooted in the sure and certain hope that things will not always be as they are today. God has another purpose, a different plan, and we are to pray for it like it all depends on God, and work for it like every bit of it depends on us!

These scriptures are meant to remind us that in the fullness of time, everything will be different. They promise a different future for those who wait, for those whose lives are so broken that they fear the world might not end.

These verses are promises for the people in another kind of sacred text <sup>iv</sup> -- this prayer list we publish every week here at Woods. It's available at the welcome booth if you want to take one home to pray. It's a list of those who are waiting -- waiting for test results, for surgeries, and treatments, and healing. Some are waiting to go home to God. Some of these are grieving the death of loved ones, or learning to care for newborn children. Some are serving in faraway or dangerous places. All of them have asked us -- no one goes on this list without asking to be put on it -- all have asked us to join them in praying, or sometimes to pray when they cannot. This is a good thing we do.

Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook* points out, these lists are also inevitably rated PG-13. There's a lot that's not on here. Jill wishes "we could put on the prayer list all the situations that [actually] keep us up at night ... the secrets we've worked so hard to hide..." I'll pray for your depression, you pray for my addiction. "I wish we *could* pray like that," she wrote. If we did we would surely find out that "we're all uniquely imperfect, and all this time I thought it was just me."<sup>v</sup> This list never includes the one who just got fired, the one who is crushed by debt, the one whose son is lost, the one facing legal problems, or all manner of other struggles, sins and sorrows that feel too awful to name. Those prayers never make the list. We usually keep those things to ourselves. We face most of those terrors alone.

Maybe that's why apocalyptic verses and stories mean so much to us, because we are all facing annihilation of some sort, and most of us can't even talk about it.

Listen: these verses are about hope – not just for socially acceptable situations, but everywhere, for everyone, facing any kind of apocalypse. "When the sun is darkened, and the moon gives up its light ..." Jesus says, "that is when you will see me. Then you will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds."

That message of hope is very good news, because we need a hero about now. We need a Savior.

Just yesterday I was talking with my son-in-law, Robert, who is a film maker himself. We were discussing the appeal of the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic television shows, books and films. Each of them has a hero or heroes, some unlikely saviors, like Katniss Everdeen or Rick Grimes. Did you know that the post-apocalyptic TV series, *The Walking Dead* is the most-watched show in cable history?

But even the heroes of these stories are flawed. The apocalyptic visions of the Bible present a different kind of hero. The church has a crucified and risen Savior. I am absolutely fascinated, and thoroughly heartened and buoyed by the picture of Jesus in this passage from the Revelation. When John was "in the spirit on the Lord's Day" he saw a vision of Jesus and fell at his feet. Then the risen Christ placed his right hand on John and said – what God has always said to human beings:

*Do not be afraid;  
I am the first and the last, and the living one.  
I was dead and behold, I am alive forevermore;  
and I have the keys of Death and Hell.*

This is not about death and annihilation. It's about resurrection! All this apocalyptic language of stars and angels, bells ringing, suns going dark and heavens shaking – is all about resurrection and eternal life. *Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.*<sup>vi</sup> The one who stands before John with flaming eyes and a face shining like the sun isn't ignorant of the terrors you and I face. He doesn't even pretend to have bypassed death himself.

Instead, he stands beside John, rests a hand on his shoulder and says, “Do not be afraid – I know that in your life you will have plenty of struggles and crisis, but guess what? I’m the one that holds the keys – and I am with you always.

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<sup>i</sup> Douglas L. Meyer, [www.holyspirit-elca.org/SERMONS/2002/021302.html](http://www.holyspirit-elca.org/SERMONS/2002/021302.html)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth/>

<sup>iii</sup> Theodore J. Wardlaw, from a sermon preach at University Presbyterian Church, Austin, TX, “Living and Giving in the Fullness of Time,” November 11, 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> Scott Black Johnston refers to the prayer list in this way in “Survival Tips for the End of the World,” a sermon preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, September 10, 2017

<sup>v</sup> Jill Duffield, “No on the prayer list” *Presbyterian Outlook*, May 26, 2012

<sup>vi</sup> Romans 8:38