

December 4, 2011: THE ULTIMACY OF GOD'S FUTURE

Mark 1:1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Isaiah 40:1-11

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Pity the poor preacher whose father *and* a mission partner are part of the congregation she addresses about God and ultimacy. It's a subject she is only *now* finding to be *not* what she thought it was. In retrospect, the sermon title sounds a little arrogant. I'd heard the word "ultimacy" tossed around at the lectionary retreat in September, and it seemed to fit the fiery events of 2 Peter, the ones at the End of the World. We're at the End of the World a lot, at the beginning of Advent, the time of year when we prepare to appreciate why we call Sweet Baby Jesus "Messiah" when we greet him on Christmas Eve. We start the story at the conclusion to God's plan, so we know where we're heading. "Messiah," it turns out, is a provocative title from the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, not king so much as it is the personification of God's intervention in human history. John the Baptist is in that tradition, which expresses its longing for God to work, through repentance, confession, and return to righteous living. It must be some kind of theme, because it's the same kind of lifestyle that 2 Peter urges in preparation for the longed-for return of Christ.

Longing is still part of how we live, but these days it's often longing to know what's under the tree, or for a moment's respite in the seasonal whirl. Or for a Walton family Christmas instead of the Griswold family Christmas you usually get. Or for the one no longer with you. I don't mean that kind of longing. I mean the kind of longing that comes through contemplative prayer and corporate worship, a longing for communion with God, one that leans forward into God's *ultimate* future. Too bad that longing gets tangled with fire in 2 Peter.

I wonder about that fire thing. Fire shows up a lot in the Bible—as a pillar leading the Israelites in the wilderness, on Mt Sinai as Moses receives the Law, as flaming tongues over believers' heads on Pentecost. Fire is sign of God's presence. It offers direction, power. That fire takes individuals and forms them into communities working to bring God's reign. This week as I thought about fire, I wondered if the Incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ is only the *start* of God's work of redemption. What I mean is, what if the fire given the Church on Pentecost is necessary to continue that redeeming work through Holy Spirit.

That, of course, takes everything I thought I believed about the End of the World and turns it upside down. Prophetic language has always been symbolic, so I don't know why we read about the destruction of the earth by fire and decide it's a pre-occurrence newspaper account of events. It has been 2,000 years. Maybe we should start reading the end-of-the-world predictions in 2 Peter as what happens *now* when we convert our lives and institutions, our social structures and lifestyles, allow Holy Spirit to transform us. In other words, *we* are that fire—our righteous living, the justice we do, the humility by which we live. We are that fiery ending to the institutional evil and structural sin that beset the world, the beginning of a new heaven and earth.

Harold Camping is only the most recent in a long line of people predicting dates for the Day of Judgment. Despite everyone from Jesus to 2 Peter saying "no one knows," we keep trying to predict *when* it will happen. It's OK to ask what time it is, but we should also be cautious about the answers. The prevailing culture is anxious to tell us what time it is. It is time to trim the tree, wrap the gifts, drink the nog, attend the parties, sing the carols, the time to believe new is always better and love is just the perfect present away. John the Baptist and 2 Peter tell us that's not the real time. It's time to change. What seems like delay from our perspective is God's insistence that it's *not too late* for us to change. The time is *now*.

What if the ultimacy of God's future isn't a "holy evacuation plan" (as Richard Rohr says), going to heaven one-by-one? What if God's ultimacy is the transformation of whole cultures and societies into places of righteousness and justice? What kind of world would this be if God were more revered than human reputations, if we worshipped God in everything we did all day long, not just for a couple of seated hours on a Sunday? What would this world be like if there was no 1% / 99% division of wealth? How would our institutions change if resources were shared equitably, if we all lived sustainably? What structures would change if implements of war became implements of farming and education and affordable healthcare? What if presidents and courts and legislative bodies were as solicitous of the needs of those they govern, as a shepherd is of his sheep? What if "disability" wasn't a handicap, clean water was readily available for all, and people didn't have to sleep under bridges?

Scripture has given us a picture of God's ultimate plan for creation. Ever since God began speaking to humans, we have heard righteousness, justice, compassion. How do we prepare for it? Jesus needed someone (John the Baptist) to prepare the way for him the first time. Who will prepare the way for his Second Coming?

When? What time *is* it? A thousand years are as a single day with God. The Lord is not slow, 2 Peter says. Is God slow or delayed? For us to act as if we were staking our grade next quarter on it. If it's going to happen anyhow, why not start living that way now? Richard Rohr says we pretty much face the God we imagine. Maybe we also get the future we imagine. If we think that future means "not enough," then it behooves us to get ours before someone else does. If we think only the fit and fast survive, we'd better get fitter faster. If we think God's ultimate future is just and compassionate, sustainable and generous, we need to see as the gospel of Matthew says, that Jesus' little brothers and sisters are the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned. We will fill the red tub for the Food Bank and support Heifer Project and help fill backpacks to send food home with school kids on the weekend and compost and recycle and consume less. And many more things, besides.

Jesus might return and shock us someday, standing us in front of the mirror at the Judgment Seat, to show us who we really are before God. Jesus might also—at this moment and every day of our lives—Jesus might also invite us to see ourselves as God sees us. To live as if the "Second Coming" was flaming tongues of fire over *our* heads. Right now. To live as if "Thy kingdom come" also means "my kingdom go." To examine institutional evil and structural sin, to repent and confess it, to change the way we live. That invitation is contained in 2 Peter's exhortation, to "lead lives of holiness and godliness." When we live like that, we *are* the ultimacy of God's future. *We* are God's ultimate future. The place where "righteousness is at home."