

Apocalypse

I'll bet that not one Episcopal Church in a hundred will be speaking about apocalypse today.

We Episcopalians like the parables, we like the wisdom stories, we like the moral teachings; but for most of us, we'd prefer to leave the "end of the world" stuff to the evangelicals and their brand of Christianity.

On Tuesday, I was at Palolo Homes where a whole bunch of renovations are getting started, and the Kahu who came for the blessing started chatting me up.

He was remembering back in the 1980's being at Palolo Homes with a 16 mm movie projector showing "End of Days" movies on the side of the buildings to the residents; and as he kept talking, I slowly edged away from him, since that kind of theology is focused way too much on who's in and who's out – whereas Jesus is always on the hunt for those who are out, doing his best to bring them in.....

As you know, Jesus' attitude about who's in and who's out is usually very different from ours.

So, "End Times" are something we don't often talk about; but the fact is; we ought to; and so, this morning, let's be that one Episcopal Church in a hundred that talks about apocalypse.

Let's talk about it because that's what Jesus is talking about this morning; and heaven knows, you're not here for what David has to say.

No, the question we all have is:

"Is there a word from the Lord today?"

"Apocalypse" is defined as "the end of the world;" an event our faith acknowledges will occur someday; but when that day is, no one knows.

And because Jesus is so clear about our inability to know when that day will be; those who rake in money hand over fist assuring others that they have the inside scoop are probably better off selling used cars, or Amway

products, instead of misleading good-hearted but gullible people with fear mongering.

As for the ultimate end, no one knows the day or the hour, not the angels, not even the Son, but only the Father.

So it is for the ultimate end of all things.

But apocalypse is not only the “end of the world” writ large; it also comes as the end of your world or mine.

Apocalypse comes in the devastating stroke that has afflicted our friend James.

Apocalypse comes in the cancer that the medications are no longer controlling.

Apocalypse comes in the untimely deaths of our children, our husbands, our wives, our friends.

It is true that apocalypse is about endings.

But it is not only about endings – indeed, it is not ultimately about endings; apocalypse is about endings that promise to lead to new birth, to new life, to new beginnings – this is the story of apocalypse.

It comes when the seed falls to the ground and dies.

It comes whenever a wronged person forgives an injustice.

It comes when we really and truly love our enemies, especially, perhaps, when the enemy is a member of our own household.

And it comes in other ways as well.

Apocalypse is the second son leaving home and blowing through his misbegotten early inheritance; only to return home into the outstretched arms of a Father who runs with joy to welcome the boy who was once lost, and who is now found, who was dead, and is now alive.

Apocalypse is Lazarus dead in his grave, sisters inconsolable, only to be summoned forth days later with the magnificent cry from outside the tomb: "Lazarus, come out!!"

Apocalypse is the death necessary for new life to emerge: and that is why Jesus speaks of these horrors not as ends in themselves, but as birth pangs.

I don't know why suffering is the path to new life; I only know that it is; with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus standing before our very eyes, as God's reassuring "yes" to our fear and confusion....

How we deal with suffering in the world, how we approach our own suffering, will, over time, shape the lives we are given to live, here and now.

As many of you know, I am a former Roman Catholic.

There are more than a few of us ex-Romans in this congregation; and I often joke with one of our friends here at St. E's who I know sometimes feels a tug to explore what Rome has to offer.

Because of my own background, I often think about what is similar between the Roman and Episcopal churches.

Both have priests and nuns.

Both have a head of the church who lives in a foreign country.

The Mass, with its focus on the Eucharist, is very similar.

I think too, sometimes, of how we are different from each other.

These differences, I think, while often subtle, are probably why so many of us former Roman Catholics have come to make our home here in the Episcopal Church.

One friend of mine likes to call us "Catholic Lite," as if we were a bottle of beer.

Another calls us "Catholics with an attitude."

Or as Robin Williams put it: “The Episcopal Church, all of the pageantry, none of the guilt!”

Perhaps there is truth in all of these observations.

However, the real difference between our two faiths – I think – is not so much in what we believe but in what we emphasize.

Many years ago, before I was ordained, and while still at my home church in Kahalu`u, Saint John’s by the Sea, I was given the opportunity to preach from time to time as a licensed lay preacher.

Fr. Charlie Hopkins, my friend and mentor, was the vicar.

One week, my sermon was about a young couple from Maryland, who, the newspaper reported, had a child out of wedlock in a motel; and, to avoid telling their parents about this birth, suffocated the newborn girl and placed her body in the motel dumpster.

My sermon that week focused on the continuing presence of evil in the world and my comments spoke of our sinfulness and the challenges our faith puts to us to change.

My comments were heavy on the Roman point of view.

The following Sunday, Fr. Charlie also spoke to that same story of the Maryland couple in his sermon.

He reflected that the love of God is strong enough to reach out to everyone, including those young people in Maryland.

He commented that if we really believe what was revealed to St. Paul, that neither sickness nor persecution nor even death can separate us from the love of God, then even at our weakest, even in our turning away from God, the loving Father turns his face toward us – and with arms outstretched, embraces us.

I have to say, I have thought a lot about Charley’s comments over the years – and it keeps me thinking about what it means to be a Christian in the Episcopal Church.

As a Roman Catholic, I spent a great deal of time thinking about my unworthiness in the face of God.

So much effort was spent focusing on the failures, the lack, the inability to measure up.

Don't get me wrong; much in the Roman tradition celebrates the love of God, just as much in that tradition rejoices in the God who loves us more than we can know.

But the Episcopal emphasis, it seems to me, leans with a deeper assurance on the unfailing love of God that, here and now, accepts us in every circumstance in life.

Everyone is welcome in the household of God.

The door is shut to no one.

Knock, and the door will be opened; ask and you will receive.

A loving God is always reaching out to us, ready to embrace, ready to heal.

It seems to me, especially when the focus today is on last things, that the Episcopal focus is a worthy, Gospel-rooted, focus.

The fact is, how we see our relationship with God has much to do with how we relate to each other.

If we think of ourselves as failures in the sight of God, won't we see ourselves as failures in the eyes of others?

If we believe in a God who is quick to judge and slow to forgive, will we treat each other any differently?

On the other hand, if we live with confidence that we are loved and treasured by God; won't we be more inclined to treat others in the same way?

At the end of the day, so much of what counts as happiness in this life, what counts as a sense of peace, no matter what happens, depends on our attitude toward God, on our attitude toward each other, on our attitude toward ourselves.

I have a story to share with you today about attitude.

It's about a young couple who just got married.

On their wedding night, soon after getting to their hotel room, this husband, clearly from the old school, takes off his pants, throws them on the ground, and says to his wife: "Wife, put those pants on!"

The wife says: "I can't wear those pants!"

To which the husband replies: "You're right, and don't you ever forget it!"

Well, the wife, not to be out done, takes off her little panties and, throwing them on the ground, says: "Husband, get into those panties!"

The husband says: "I can't get into those!"

And the wife replies: "You're right, and you won't until you change your attitude!"

I believe his attitude changed completely that very night!

And then there is this story.

It's about a young Jewish girl in Nazi Germany whose cat, that very morning, had kittens.

It turns out that the propagandist, Goebbels, was at her school that day and he overheard the young girl telling her friends with excitement:

"My cat just had kittens, and they're all Nazis!"

Goebbels thought this would be a great propaganda piece.

So he arranged, a few weeks later, for the young girl to be on the radio to say what she had said in school.

The program is announced, and on that day, Goebbels says to the girl:

"Hey Jew, tell us about your kittens!"

And the little girl replies:

“My cat had kittens, and they’re all *social democrats!*”

Well, Goebbels is all shook up.

“That’s not what you said before!”

And the little Jewish girl says:

“My cat had kittens, and they **were** all Nazis – and then their eyes were opened.”

Their eyes were opened.

Apocalypse, endings, suffering -- even confronting our stereotypes and prejudices -- all of these have one end – one promised end – to open our eyes to the God who is nearer to us than our breath, to the God who is more faithful than the sunrise.

And so this day, in the very midst of our own endings, in the midst of our own apocalypse, on this day, may we open our eyes, and rejoice with the Psalmist who sings:

“My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices;
my body also shall rest in hope.

For you do not abandon me to the grave,
nor let your holy one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy,

and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

+amen

