

Apocalyptic? Probably Not.

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, September 4, 2011, The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 18:15-20.*

Earlier this week I got a postcard from some non-church friends of mine who live out of the city during the summer. The photograph showed a beautiful misty lake surrounded by gentle, verdant mountains. Their message was short and to the point: "Hope you have had a great summer—even if a clearly apocalyptic one. Lots of love." It occurred to me again that I have odd friends, but I do know what they were thinking about. The earthquake, the hurricane, the debt crisis, Libya, Afghanistan, the famine in Somalia becoming the worst humanitarian crisis in decades, zero job growth in our economy, riots in London, mostly bad summer movies, no tickets available for *The Book of Mormon*, politicians who are truly and increasingly bizarre—apocalyptic indeed! Come, Lord Jesus, come!

And there is no obvious end in sight. Apparently this is to be the context of our lives for now, leaving us the question always left by life: How shall we respond? Shall we eat, drink, and be merry? Shall we grouse, kvetch, and bemoan? Shall we fill our lives with whatever level of vapid luxuries we can afford, acting as though we believe that getting and spending or getting and hoarding will truly do it for us? Or shall we become so serious and ponderous about the dilemmas of life that all who love us will begin to hope for the apocalypse, or at least for ours?

What I am talking about, of course, is nothing less than our search for meaning. That remains the ultimate search, as true for us today as for Victor Frankl sixty-five years ago and for others long before and since him. We may never eagerly embrace the horrific events that seem to be inextricably a part of life; but if we can attach meaning to them, even if not exactly explain them, then we can survive them, either literally or not, learning, growing—somehow retaining our humanness in the midst of that which on its own would not only dehumanize us but also would surely exhaust the divine within us. The overarching question in all religion, philosophy, and psychology is how we as cognitive and feeling creatures understand our purpose, our reason for being. How we live mirrors our answer to that question.

At the most immediate level, usually it is our eyes that tell our stories. Though difficult to precisely describe, when we truly look at others, we *know* who is at home and who is not; we detect the sparkle that meaning brings, aliveness that continues to hope and even thrive despite the circumstances of life. And sadly also we recognize the vacancy and flatness of the eyes of those whose lives are experienced as meaningless and the equally disturbing but smiling eyes of others that belie immense, soul-stripping anxiety, a condition known to and denied by so many. Our end of society seems to specialize in this latter malady.

"The night is far gone," wrote Paul to the Romans, "the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as though in the day."

For those of you who follow such things, you may be thinking that this passage from Paul's letter to the Romans has a distinctly Advent feeling to it. And if so, you are absolutely right. It is indeed a passage, a portion of it anyway, that we hear read on the first Sunday of Advent. If I were to be assigned the task of delineating the top five messages of our faith—I can't imagine being assigned such a thing, but go with me—near the top, perhaps right alongside the admonition to love God, neighbor and self, would be this theme: the night is far gone, it is time to awake, to choose light over darkness, to live life as though this moment were the last sure moment we have, as indeed it is.

In the context of our faith story, we understand this way of living, this drive for acuity of life, in terms of Christ's coming among us in all the ways that Christ has, is, and will come among us. One of the great gifts of early Christian scripture is that the writers believed that the end was upon them. In this part of his letter Paul writes, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." Paul and the other writers of his era believed that the dramatic end of time was coming not far in the distance but soon, that in the language of

this apocalyptic genre, “Christ would come again.” And though they were wrong about how it would occur, unmistakably so, our lives bearing witness to that error, they were not wrong about the poignancy of the message. Every life is climactic, another word for apocalyptic; every life is ultimate, imbued with meaning, either its presence or its absence; and every moment lived without the awareness that time is short is a wasted moment.

It is easy to understand how this kind of message might become a badly concocted “Hallmark” moment. But let’s be clear: This is not just *carpe diem*, not just living life with gusto or taking time to smell the roses, though each of these idioms has great worth. The difference is that our faith teaches us to do these things not just to “grab life,” but primarily to know God, a difference that transforms the event from a photo moment to a way of life. It is a difference which carries Paul to a point that appears moralistic but in fact is much more than that. His advice not to waste our lives in jealousy and bickering or in drunkenness and licentiousness is not about living dour, passionless lives but to live in the quick, to live where we are alive and not anesthetized by anything—including our addiction to being right, a not often found 12 Step group but one that the church should surely sponsor! “Hello, my name is Buddy; and I am addicted to always being right, and it is not working for me.”

The urgency of life which oozed from these early Christian stories was not derived so much from the fact that life was hard and dangerous, though it was, as from the notion that anything that averted or substituted for real life should be avoided. Human to the end, marvelously so I think, Paul sometimes veered from the reservation, famously writing, for example, that even marriage should be entered into if only utterly necessary, perhaps reflecting a few of his own issues. But his overriding point is a good one: only engage that which keeps you keen and awake, looking every moment for life, every moment for the coming of God.

This is a great lesson with which to end our summer and launch a new season in our lives. At St. Bart’s we are approaching a crossroads, a natural moment in the life of this wonderful old place at which we must look as honestly at ourselves as we can. What about life here makes us alive? What feeds and nourishes us in our search for God? What traditions hold us as in the palm of God’s hands, and which ones are tired and void of life? We don’t need to be afraid of these questions for fear that what is enlivening for us may be deadening to another. This is not about one group of us being right and the other wrong; it is about our enhancing our common lives as people who share the genuine search for God.

I know this is insider talk and I beg your pardon for taking a homiletic moment for it. The truth is that I believe passionately in this community, its history and its future. St. Bart’s is one—certainly not the only—but one gathering of people who are earnestly searching for God, imperfectly, sometimes with great faithfulness and sometimes with great doubt, but always with the commitment that all that is to be has not yet come—not in lives, not at St. Bart’s, and not in all of creation. Are these apocalyptic times? I don’t know, though my guess is that they are not, in the classic sense of that word.

Actually, I worry much less about end times than I do about missing *this* time. And so on this day, the only day I know I have, I stand by my conviction that all time is apocalyptic time—for time is always too short to be missed and way too short not to love.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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