

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

November 13, 2016

The End of the World As We Know It

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth – Isaiah 65:17-25

There are times in life when we have a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation: savouring a sunset after a relaxing summer day; in the first blush of a new romance; looking back with satisfaction on a successfully completed project – at such times, whatever our religious beliefs, we have a sense of being blessed, and we are grateful.

There are other times when life seems monstrously unfair. That can happen to us personally:

- when a trust is betrayed;
- when a serious illness threatens our life or family;
- when racism and economic forces conspire against us;
- when violence or cruelty touch us in shocking ways.

But that sense of the unfairness of life can sometimes strike us indirectly:

- when we hear about a horrific act of violence;
- or we see a picture, like that of three year-old Alan Kurdi washed up on a beach;
- or when we receive news, like many of us did this week, that voters have chosen someone who represents values that are so diametrically opposed to our own that it feels the world can never be put right again, that dark and dangerous forces have prevailed, that genies have escaped that can never be put back in.

At such times, whatever our religious beliefs, we have a sense that the natural order of things has been disrupted, and we are hurt and angry and scared. I have been all of those things this week. And I have received messages from people who have felt defeated, depressed and discouraged.

However dramatic the events of this past week have been, these experiences are not unprecedented. People who live with the experience of racist and sexual violence know that dark and dangerous forces have long stalked this earth. The Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, once wrote a lament for similar times, in which he sensed that the moral centre had lost its power, that goodness and God, symbolized by a falconer summoning his bird, was unable to be heard:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹

¹ from the poem, “The Second Coming”

That line “the worst / are full of passionate intensity,” seems exactly right to me but whether the best of us lack conviction, or whether we have been complacent or whether we have underestimated the power of evil in the world, I am not sure. I suspect all three.

But the more I think about what happened in the American election, the more that I am convinced that what drove those results is a particular form of despair, masquerading as hope. The Trump campaign, the Brexit vote, and other movements around the world, seem to grow out of a profound disillusionment with the political and economic forces currently in control. I am sympathetic to that disillusionment. But rather than engage responsibly in proposing alternatives, these movements latch onto whatever personalities offer to overthrow the way things are. They offer a revolution without a plan, and a revolution without a plan is simply a riot, a recipe for chaos.

That is why I say that I think that what we are dealing with is despair that is only masquerading as hope. But perhaps the church has something to offer here. For despair and hope are things we have been thinking about for a long time, particularly at this time of year, when the lectionary Bible readings are about God’s future.

Despair is the sense that there is no real moral order to the universe, that justice and fairness are nothing more than illusions and wishful thinking. This form of despair is very common in our culture, particularly among young people who have little sense of spiritual connection or spiritual community. They see life as meaningless and aimless, and they think their choices do not have any real significance, that nothing they do really matters.

There are two dominant reactions to this kind of despair: one is repress any thought of it through drugs, alcohol, sexual adventure, or mindless consumerism. And for some it takes the form of unfocused anger, even violent behavior, as people lash out, physically or in the ballot box.

Another response to despair is to focus on our own internal peace, which one scholar calls “the struggle for composure,”² seeking solace in the quest for personal fulfillment, cocooning ourselves in our happy place. I took the title of this sermon from a song by REM that seems to express this response: even though, it’s the end of the world as we know it, I can still feel fine.

Strangely enough, this response to despair often masquerades as a particularly pious hope and faith. Those who have succumbed to it believe that this world is either unimportant or irredeemably evil and seek their own personal salvation, projecting their hope onto an otherworldly future, or some heavenly realm where everything will be put right. For such people the only thing that matters is whether we have developed the faith to assure our place in heaven. While it masquerades as faith, this view really is just another form of despair, because it gives up on the world God created, and the world God loves. It gives up on a world that the Biblical tradition says God most expressly does not give up on, a world in which God is continually at work to redeem and make new, a world for which God gave himself in the form of Jesus, so that the world might be reconciled and saved from itself.

The danger of reading the passages that we read this morning is that they can be misunderstood as speaking of this pious form of despair. When Isaiah speaks of a new creation, new heavens and new earth, he can easily be misunderstood to be referring to something that will replace this

² Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*

present creation. When Jesus speaks of the destruction of the temple, and of wars and insurrections and earthquakes and famines and plagues and persecutions, he can easily be misunderstood as referring to the destruction of this world.

But neither Jesus nor Isaiah are speaking of the destruction of this world. They are speaking rather of the redemption and perfection of this world. The passage from Isaiah was written during a particular depressing time in the history of the Jewish nation, when exiles had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem with high hopes of rebuilding the temple and the community only to find themselves mired in economic depression, political instability and a disabling sense of shame.

To this dispirited and discouraged community, the prophet speaks of a fresh outpouring of God's creative love in the world, a radical renewal of the creation, a calling of the world back to God's loving intent. The passage contrasts past troubles with future joys, and encourages the community to work steadfastly toward that day in which premature death is unknown, workers receive a just reward for their labour, and violence is a fading memory.

The passage from Luke may sound like the destruction of the world, but in fact it is referring to an actual historical event, the Jewish revolt in the year 66, and the devastating war which followed, in which Roman armies laid siege to Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and crucified tens of thousands of people. This was not an otherworldly event; it was historical reality. And about all of this, the gospel urges caution about false prophets, courage in the face of uncertainty, and faithfulness in the face of persecution. All that is happening, the gospel advises, will give you the opportunity to bear witness to the God who loves the world and to the Christ who came to save it.

These passages both speak to people who are caught in extraordinarily difficult times. They both encourage us to resist any form of despair, which might lead us to abandon this world. They remind us that this world, with all its tragedy, all of its injustice, all of its sadness, is still the good creation of God, who is at work in mysterious but powerful ways to finish the creation he started long ago. Those who live with this kind of a hope will not abandon this world, but will face cruelty and injustice and tragedy with a steadfast assurance that in the end justice and fairness will have the last word, because God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.

I chose the picture on the cover of your bulletin this morning because it reminded me of what William James once said about how God works in the world. God, James said, is "creeping through the crannies of the world," like the roots of a tree penetrate the tiny fissures in rock and eventually split it. Just as even the mightiest mountain will eventually be reduced to rubble by the action of roots and shoots, so God's spirit slowly but powerfully works its way into the structures of violence and conflict in order to split them open and transform them into a peaceful world.

This week, in the face of the latest demonstration of the powerful forces of racism and sexism and despair, we have to summon a similar hope, the hope of William James, and the hope of Martin Luther King that though the arc of history may be long, and difficult to see in any given situation, that the arc of the moral universe does bend toward justice. And there is a moral power in the universe, which will have the last word.

And so I affirm here this morning, and I call on you to live and act in the hope that God's justice and love and grace will have the last word in this world.

- The Ku Klux Klan, the Alt-right and white power movements will not have the last word, but God's all-inclusive love will have the last word;
- Those who brag about their ability to dominate women will not have the last word, but the promise of Mary's Magnificat, that the lowly will be lifted up and the mighty cast from their thrones, will be fulfilled;
- Those who bully others and mock the disabled will not have the last word but the one who was himself mocked and spat on and flogged and crucified will be the final judge of history;
- Those who exploit racial and religious bigotry will not have the last word; instead, people from every nation, tribe, creed and language will sing together in harmony before the throne of God.

We may well ask, as people in every situation of injustice and oppression have asked, how long will it be that the wicked prosper? How long will the glass ceiling remain solid? How long will the powerful abuse the innocent? "How long will prejudice blind their vision, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne? How long will justice be crucified?"³

And we can answer, as Martin Luther King, answered, that "however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, that it will not be long.

- How long? Not long, because 'no lie can live forever.'
- How long? Not long, because 'you shall reap what you sow.'
- How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."⁴
- How long? Not long, because "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth."
(Isaiah)
- How long? Not long, because "by your endurance you will gain your souls." (Luke)

How long? Not long, although that depends a lot on us and whether we succumb to despair, or act in hope. There is "no fate," as John Connor famously said in the Terminator movies. We are shaping the future in the choices we ourselves make. The only hopeful response to this temporary set-back is to recommit ourselves, each in our own way, to serving our community and our world: seeking to do what we can to make Isaiah's vision more and more a reality, seeking to do our part in shaping a world where no infant will live only a few days, and no old person will die prematurely, in which workers will receive a just reward for their labour and even historic enemies will find ways to live in peace. When we do that, we can endure even the worst tragedies and set backs, because we know that we have allied ourselves to God's wisdom and power, which will, in the end, have the last word.

Let us pray: Thank you God, that you do not give up on this world, that constantly throughout history, you are pouring forth your powerful love, persuading and enticing us to do your will,

³ Martin Luther King sermon, "Our God is Marching On"

⁴ Martin Luther King sermon, "Our God is Marching On"

and so to bring your new creation into being. Open us we pray, to your love, so that we may do our part, in our day and generation, to make your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Opening Prayer & Lord's Prayer

So many gifts, so many blessings, so many miracles, that surround us every day. Reasons for giving thanks surround us every day, every minute in the ordinary treasures of life. Forgive us that we slouch past so many blessings, focused on what we don't have rather than what we do. Forgive us, and open us we pray to your plain blessings. "Transform our hearts into generous soil,"⁵ in which seeds of your new creation may grow and flourish. For we ask it in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying...

Prayers of the People

In hope we offer you these prayers this day. Rouse us to live in this age in light of our hope for your kingdom of justice and love. Inspire in us a real hope, a hope that trusts in the future even when the future seems bleak, a hope not in what we can see, but in what we cannot see, a hope that even in illness, endings and death, there may be a new beginning, even in failure a new possibility, even in betrayal an opportunity for faithfulness.

Grant hope to those who have been mentioned in our midst today, and forge us together into such a community that we rejoice together in good times, grieve together in times of sorrow, hope together in times of fear, and work together with a common purpose and a common vision.

For these things we pray in the name of the one whose body we are and whose instruments we are called to be. Amen.

⁵ Wehlander, *Joy is Our Banquet*, p. 92.

The Second Coming by [W. B. Yeats](#)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?