

I Have a Dream

An Apocalypse

By Pastor Pauline Farrington



As we wind down the end of the liturgical year and look toward Advent, we probably already have our minds filled with Christmas. It's easy to be distracted by those (rightfully) much anticipated seasons. I'll admit that I have, every year, groaned a bit as we approached the Sundays leading up to Advent and the new liturgical year. Every year, the November lectionary readings are heavy with apocalyptic literature, and there's just no way for a preacher to unpack all the confusing, sometimes frightening, imagery. Add to that, All Saints and Christ the

King Sundays, and a preacher is left with the dilemma of letting those strange and troubling texts just hang there with no comment or discussion. Then we're left with more questions than comfort, which is opposite the literature's intent. Comfort and encouragement are the intent, but it's hard for us to get there so many centuries removed from their original literary context.

"Apocalypse," a Greek word, historically means "reveal, disclose, uncover." It can also be used to describe an insight or vision. Or a dream. Only in modern usage has it been understood to mean a cataclysm or destruction. None of the original writers of apocalyptic literature were writing visions of the end of the world — perhaps an end of an evil empire or oppressive ruler, though. These visions were written to people who were being persecuted, held captive, attacked, or exploited, to offer them hope and encouragement. To instill confidence that God is faithful, and to remind them to be faithful as well. To give them a vision that will help them hold on through extremely difficult times and intense suffering. A very brief and generalized summary of apocalyptic texts is this: God is bringing about that which is life-giving. God is bringing about the end of that which is not life-giving.

Here are excerpts of what we can expect to hear:

November 7, All Saints Sunday (there are tears in every reading this Sunday)

Isaiah 25:6-9

God will destroy the shroud of death that is spread over all humanity...forever
God will wipe away the tears from every face and take away the people's disgrace
this is the Lord for whom we have waited

Revelation 21:1-6a

a new heaven and a new earth —
the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven
the home of God is among mortals; God will dwell with them
all humanity will be God's people
God will wipe away every tear
death will be no more

mourning and crying and pain will be no more
God is making all things new

November 14

Daniel 12:1-3

God has put “the great prince,” Michael, in charge
at the time of greatest anguish, the people will be delivered
the dead will awake — a vision of resurrection
those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky
those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars

Mark 13:1-8

regarding the large stones of the large buildings of the temple, all will be thrown down
many will come in Christ’s name and say “I am he” and lead many astray
wars, rumors of wars, nation against nation, ecological disasters
but this is the beginning of birth pangs — of new life, not death

November 21, Christ the King Sunday

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

an Ancient One (God) on the throne lasts even as every earthly dominion is destroyed
One like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven came to the Ancient One
to the one like a human being was given dominion and glory and kingship
the one whom all humankind would serve in a dominion that will never be destroyed
Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace and peace from him who is, who was, who is to come
and from Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth
to him be glory and dominion forever
Look! he is coming, every eye will see him, even those who killed him
God is the beginning and the end, the one who is, who was, who is to come

One of my preaching professors, Dr. Shauna Hannan who now teaches at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, compares the Isaiah text to Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and invites us to weave all these apocalyptic texts into a vision for today. Given the context of our world — climate disaster, health crises (not to mention pandemic), wars and rumors of wars, people displaced, ongoing chaos and violence, racial, social, and economic injustice — how might these fantastical images and promises bring hope, encouragement, and comfort to our hurting world? How might they instill confidence in us that God is faithful, and remind us to be faithful as well? How might they give us a vision that will help us hold on through extremely difficult times? Where might we see God bringing about that which is life-giving and God bringing about the end of that which is not life-giving?

It’s all an apocalypse — something to dream about.