**“It’s the End of the World as we know it…and I feel fine”**

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I’m not much of a believer when it comes to standardized testing. I don’t like taking them, and I think the research has basically shown that they don’t really have much predictive value. They don’t tell you much about what will happen in the future. Except for one thing. Standardized texts are very good at predicting what the school will teach next year. Because, usually, schools teach to the tests.

I know this is true from personal experience. I had to take a standardized test back in 2007 when I became a priest. There’s a national Episcopal ordination exam that all graduating seminarians have to sit for before they can be ordained. (Funnily enough, you don’t have to pass it, you just have to sit for it. It’s up the bishop whether you performed well enough!) Because the possible subject matter for the exam is nearly endless, covering the whole range of Christian doctrine and practice, the preparation and education tends to focus around the aspects of Christianity that are most central to most Episcopalians. Heavy on incarnation, Eucharist, sacraments, lighter on some other things, like for example, pre-millennial dispensationalism. I’m sorry what was that? Did you sneeze?

Pre-millennial dispensationalism is a particular strain of apocalyptic theology – that is, theology about the end of time. It was popularized by the Left Behind series of novels and later films. Does anyone remember them? These books emerged from a time when the culture wars raged and fundamentalist Christianity was asserting itself just as global communication was on the cusp of being transformed by the internet age. The Left Behind series explored a specific interpretation of the Book of Revelation – imagining what the end of the world might look like if it came in the present-day, pluralistic, individualistic landscape of the late 20th century.

And they were popular. Wildly popular. The 16 novels in the series sold something like over 80 million copies, according to NPR. There were films and even a video game at one point. And they were so widespread that on that national Episcopal ordination exam in 2006, there was a 3 hour required essay about them. My friends were a bit shell-shocked walking out of that exam – the end of the world wasn’t exactly something they had spent a lot of time preparing to discuss theologically. They did not perform well. And the next year, I learned all about pre-millenial dispensationism and read a lot of the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation is not particular popular in the Episcopal Church…or indeed, much of mainline Christianity. We’re not super solid on the Bible as whole, and the Revelation’s lengthy descriptions of persecutions, gory depictions of destruction, the graphic language, the dualistic and judgmental imagery, don’t exactly make it first on the list.

When we do read the Revelation in church, we tend to read passages like the one we had today: from the very end of the book, in which God delivers on the promise of a new heaven and a new earth – the vision of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, coming into being. Today’s passage is a kind of “uncreation” story – describing a time when we no longer need what God made in Genesis: the sun and moon, the day and night, the land and the sea, because all that was created is now in direct contact with the eternal Light of Christ. We read these passages, and understand them as a depiction of a future transition out of the era of recorded time...a topic which is hard for us to relate to intellectually and perhaps a bit threatening spiritually. After all, we tend to like having a world to live in…even if we don’t like how we and others live in it much of the time. So we quickly move on to something else.

But ultimately this avoidance is a shame. And we ignore the Revelation at our peril, and not just because of standardized ordination exams. The Revelation offers an important challenge, one best expressed in the classic song lyric of REM in the 1990’s: “It’s the end of the world as we know, and I feel fine.” The gift of a strong Christian faith is be able to say this and really mean it. And the task for our theological imagination is to be able to articulate why we do. Neither of these is easy. They require an intense level of trust in God, of surrender to the one who made not just us, but all that is, and in fact, the very idea of being -- and who will someday, unmake, or more accurately, re-make being into something new. This trust is what Christ offers us and asks of us.

If we shy away from accepting that gift and cultivating that trust, we don’t just cede theological territory to Christian exclusivists who offer a narrow, fundamentalist, and purity-based ideal of who gets to heaven when all is said and done. We also rob ourselves of the powerful warning that the Revelation to John offers about the dangers of Christians loving the world more than the Risen Christ.

The Revelation to John at heart, is a critique of worldly empire and those who love it, benefit from it, and perpetuate it. The historical context certainly was the Roman Empire in the early 2nd century, but to limit ourselves to that frame of interpretation domesticates the text. It’s symbolic resonance extends beyond one Empire to all human-ordered systems which lead to domination. It is true that the text was written as an encouragement to remain faithful at a time when Christians were all marginalized people practicing an illegal faith. But the Revelation is perhaps even more important as a corrective to Christians living in empowered contexts. For as Christians living more or less comfortably within the Empires of our own time and place, we live with the constant opportunity to profess a faith with our lips that is not matched by the faith in our hearts or our lives as fully as God would desire or us.

On the individual level, the Revelation reminds empowered Christians that personal experiences of worldly power and relative material comfort, very often create beasts so horrific they can only be described in Biblical metaphors that are the stuff of nightmares. The imagery is helpful because it makes ugly and horrific the everyday evils of living too in love with this world -- evils that can appear banal, ordinary, and even commonplace. On the collective level, the Revelation reminds us that concentrations of wealth and power inevitably lead to the oppression and victimization of those who can’t or won’t compete on playing fields that are fundamentally unfair. This is not just a historical reality from a time long ago, it is also a symbolic and timeless truth.

And yet, despite the directness with which it challenges our inordinate love of the world, the Book of Revelation is a source of hope for us as Easter People. It is the promise that somehow we will find ourselves raised with Christ into the new life of grace – sometime between now and when the end of recorded time rolls around. Despite its title suggesting it will “reveal” *how* this will happen, one commentator notes, the Revelation really creates as much mystery as it explains about how this will happen. Will God simply plop down a new order of existence and populate it with a faithful remnant who remained pure in their early lives, as the Left Behind series imagines? Will humanity and indeed all of creation work ourselves into the City of God that John describes, through the process struggle and effort and success and setbacks, as reformers have imagined in various ages? Will it be some other way entirely?

I have absolutely no idea what God has in store for *how* this will happen. But we are taught to believe that it will happen, and to live our lives based on that belief. To use more familiar words, we are taught to believe that “the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice,” and I accept that teaching. I work in my heart to accept the gift of knowing that, at the end of the world as I know it, I will feel fine. And I work in my mind to imagine creatively – not so much who will be in and who will be out of that heavenly city – but rather, what this belief requires of us here and now. I imagine the various things it calls upon me to renounce in this life as worth far less than I imagine or than the world instructs. What privileges and practices are we called to set aside because they ultimately compete with our highest love, which is our love for the God of Love?

As we come to the end of our readings in Revelation, I wonder what has been revealed to you. About what those worldly things are that draw us away from our love for God, and if we’re not careful, turn us into beasts. About the vision of the heavenly city in which everything is redeemed and illuminated by the light of Christ. And about what you need to be able to say with the confidence that at the end of the world as we know, I feel fine. Amen.