

A Revolution of Hope

I. Two ways to see the Apocalyptic

- A. There is a painting by Vincent van Gogh done in 1889 that captures the mood of the apocalyptic text from the end of St. Luke's Gospel that we have just heard.
1. It is called, "*Starry Night*." (Please find a copy of it with your bulletin.)
 - a. It's his most famous and one of the most well known images in modern art.
 2. The painting exhibits the bold colors that van Gogh is known for and the style he made famous called "*post-impressionist*."
 3. Van Gogh was the son of a Dutch pastor and for years was an evangelist to the poor, so he would have been familiar with the texts such as this one from Luke 21.
 4. The painting depicts an apocalyptic sky, like that described by Jesus.
 - a. There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep dark blue and black.
 - b. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars hugely inflated in burning yellow.
 - c. In the background is a small town, with the church steeple as its most prominent feature.
 - d. In the foreground, there is a foreboding dark flame-like image connecting the earth and sky.
 - (1. Art historians take it to be a cypress tree, which in van Gough's time would be associated with graveyards and mourning.
 5. The famous painting elicits differing reactions from its admirers.
 - a. Some see it as an image of a frightening sky. ---
 - (1. Art historian Sven Loevgren calls *The Starry Night* a "*visionary painting*,"... "*conceived in a state of great agitation...with "hallucinatory character and violently expressive form."*

- b. Another sees it as something bold and beautiful. ---
 - (1. In a *"state of heightened reality,"* with all the other elements of the painting in place, Van Gogh threw himself into the painting of the stars, producing, *"a night sky unlike any other the world had ever seen with ordinary eyes."*
- c. Some see it as a glimpse of God. ---
 - (1. Again, Loevgren calls *The Starry Night, Van Gogh's "religiously inclined longing for the beyond;" "an infinitely expressive picture which symbolizes the final absorption of the artist by the cosmos"* and which *"gives a never-to-be-forgotten sensation of standing on the threshold of eternity."*
(*The Starry Night*, Wikipedia)

- B. Like van Gough's great painting, Jesus' prophetic picture in Luke's *"apocalypse"* elicits different reactions.
 - 1. A frightening, bold, and beautiful glimpse of God, ----
 - 2. or, as some from early times and today take it, --
 - a. a threatening prediction of fear and desperation, violence and judgment.
 - b. The forces of good and evil face off in preparation for Christ's rescue of all the believers while the others will be *"left behind."* ----
- C. It's not hard for us to see that we do live in apocalyptic times.
 - 1. This is not a new theme. It's been a perspective on the world from ancient times. --
 - a. And truly, there have been ages where everything people trusted for safety and normalcy has been wiped away by violence and disaster.
 - 2. We could make an even stronger case in a world today on a fast track to a truly global culture.
 - a. This week, leaders from over 200 nations will meet in Paris in an attempt to make some accord on the human causes of climate change.
 - (1. The experts warn that to avert catastrophic impacts on global climate, the nations of the world must keep the average temperature increase less than 2 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial age levels.
 - (2. But even if the promises recently made are kept unconditionally, we are now on track to at least a 2.7 degree increase by 2100.

- b. To some terrorism and war seem the natural response.
 - (1. Apocalyptic expectation as a self fulfilling prophecy of the end is one of the most dangerous mind sets of our time.
 - (2. We are perfectly willing to sacrifice the common good of all, to increase our own carefully bounded worlds.
 - (3. In the name of God, we destroy what should be preserved here and now.
 - (4. Human accountability before others and to God is thrown out the window.
- 3. But there is another Christian story that focuses on joy, the resurrection and the renewal of all things.
 - a. The vision of the end is not a prediction of terror but a promise of great joy.
 - b. That is what we hear from Luke this morning.

II. A Cosmic revolution of hope

- A. Luke sees Christ coming into our world, as an earthshaking event.
 - 1. At the beginning of every new Church Year this is how we are introduced to a season of waiting and preparation, called, Advent.
 - 2. All of our dominions, and the power and structures upon which they are based, stand before God's judgment.
 - a. This is a reality larger than our personal lives.
 - (1. The scriptures see this as a cosmic revolution,--
 - (2. the transformation of our world into the realm of God.
 - b. It is what we heard Jesus refer to before Pilate when he said,
 - (1. *"My kingdom is not of this world."*
 - 3. But Luke's painting of the apocalypse resists the fearful interpretation that today has become widely popular. ---
 - a. There are threatening images,
 - (1. From our point of view, the prospect of such change is indeed a fearful specter.
 - (2. But instead of fear and damnation, Luke draws our attention to hope and expectation.
 - b. God in Christ is coming because God is a God of love. --
 - (1. God's will always, is to bring all of creation, to its fullness into the life of God.
 - c. Jesus calls us to *"stand up and raise our heads because our redemption is drawing near."*

- B. The scriptures of Advent call us to begin afresh.
1. It's a new liturgical year, but the kind of new beginning it talks about is not "calendar time." --
 - a. Rather, it's a new beginning in our hearts, in relationships, in congregations.
 - (1. It's a new beginning in a fresh yearning, for a promise worth living for. ---
 2. Our common view of time is that of the clock and the calendar,-- hours, days, months, years, seen through our own life stories.
 - a. We all see this time differently, with varying degrees of optimism or pessimism, --
 - (1. with expectations of progress or doom as we look to the future,
 - (2. with a sense of superiority as we see our own past,
 - (3. or a sense of hurt.
 - b. We live with varying degrees of resignation to oppression and failure,
 - (1. and, with over-estimations of our own powers and virtues.
 3. Luke wrote about Christian discipleship with a sense that we live "*between the times.*"
 - a. We're aware of Jesus having come, with the Good News of his life, death and resurrection proclaimed by the apostles.
 - b. Yet in Luke's terms, we're still waiting for Christ in glory.
 4. But maybe we could look at this the other way around: Christ is waiting for us.
 - (1. Christ's definitive work has been done and we're still getting to know Christ in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable and tumultuous world.---
 - (2. Christ stands before us here and now. ---
 - (3. Christ holds before us a vision of a world in relationship to God.
- C. Living in God's Kingdom calls us to a different story about time.
1. It is a story beyond our own private optimism or pessimism.

- a. Look instead from the inner dimension of our lives where we see all creation alive, in the rhythm of reality and promise.
- 2. The change that comes to us from God, moment by moment cannot be predicted or controlled.
 - a. There is promise in that the present moment is a gift, an event worth loving and living.
 - b. Accept the present moment with thanksgiving, and trust the promise that is behind it. --
 - (1. It both points and carries us into God's future.
 - c. Pray for strength to do what is necessary to fill the moment with faithfulness and genuine waiting for God.
- 3. "*Living between the times*" as Luke writes about discipleship, --
 - a. is living without nostalgia for the past, --
 - b. or "pie in the sky" dreaming for the future. --
 - c. Live in the reality of whatever is before us with,
 - (1. real hope,
 - (2. real knowledge,
 - (3. real love in Jesus Christ.
 - d. No one ever said this would be easy but believing in God's promise, we live this way by Faith and lots of Prayer.

D. Advent makes this challenge.

- 1. Can we look to God's coming with our hearts, will and creativity, with a joyful anticipation of resurrection and restoration?--
 - a. as an alternative to apocalyptic doom? ---
 - b. Can we live in hope, faith, and accountability before God and one another for God's future?
- 2. Can we counteract the rhetoric of "*holy wars?*"
 - a. Could we find God's redemptive purpose equally compelling toward joining in the "*holy work*" of reconciliation?
- 3. Christians say that Christ is doing just this in many people and places all over the world.
 - a. Advent calls us to be mindful and intentional to join ourselves with Christ in this living work.