

Shadowboxing the Apocalypse©

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

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I have got some very good news to share with you this morning. The Apocalypse predicted for the day after the election - didn't happen! The world didn't end! We're still here! Regardless of which section of the political spectrum you were rooting for, there were wins and losses to celebrate and mourn for everyone. This election reminds me of that line from a T.S. Eliot poem "This is how the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper." For now, predictions of the demise of democracy or streets overwhelmed by crime seem to have abated. So we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and go on about our business again, until the next election cycle, when we will all, once again, start shadowboxing the apocalypse

You know what shadowboxing is, right? It's a form of training in boxing in which you fight an imaginary opponent. I think it's a good description of the worst aspects of election campaigns. With a few messages and slogans tested in focus groups, you try to turn your opponent into a caricature, a small shadow of who they are, a shadow that you can air-punch endlessly.

I can barely tolerate political ads any more— but just when I thought they had gotten more meanspirited and outrageous than ever before, I came across this statement from the Republicans, claiming that Democrats are "a rendezvous of thieves, a bucket of home parasites and bloodsuckers". Next - I read another one from the Democrats claiming that a Republican was a drunkard, and had illicit relations with sex worker. And then – yet another ad from a third-party candidate called his opponent a "pot-bellied, mutton-headed cucumber". Have you heard any of these ads? Probably not – because these were mudslinging quotes from various elections held—in the 19th century! History helps us to put everything in perspective. Election campaigns always seem to predict the apocalypse if the other side wins. The real horror of this election is that the issues most people were concerned about were personal pocketbook issues, rather than the actual apocalypse that is on the ballot every time we have an election.

And what is this apocalypse? It's our inability to deal with the rapidly escalating twin global disasters of climate change and environmental degradation. So there's another meaning for the word: "shadowboxing", and it's one that describes our political situation perfectly.

Shadowboxing means "to make a show of tacking an opponent or a problem without having any direct engagement". Shadowboxing the apocalypse is what we are literally doing within our politics today.

This week, the election overshadowed the COP 27 Climate Change Summit being held in Egypt, and the fact that it's the 27th climate change summit tells you something about how far we have come in reaching consensus on effective and accountable solutions, Meanwhile, on the east coast of Florida this week, a rare November Hurricane Nicole has sent swaths of coastal home

sliding into the ocean, just weeks after storm surge from Hurricane Ian devastated the Fort Myers area. Sea levels rise; species demise; glaciers shrink, water you can't drink; rivers are drying, lakes are dying, forests burning, birds not returning—and that's just the natural world!

The impact on human communities, especially underserved income and marginalized communities, is equally devastating.

The political and theological right take this Apocalypse in stride because they saw it coming. It's all there in the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, and it's all meant to be. We may remember the enormously popular "Left Behind" series--a fundamentalist view of the End Times. Ideas like this play a part in the policies espoused by conservative political parties and office holders and election campaigns.

So it's no surprise that people who believe in progressive politics and espouse a liberal faith are not big fans of the Book of Revelation. It's the original Apocalypse story which has influenced Western Civilization's picture of how the world ends!

If you've never read it, I'm not surprised. If you decide to after this sermon, let me warn you -- it's a nasty book. It is misogynistic, it is full of covert and overt anti-Semitism and Christian triumphalism. Reading it is like a bad acid trip.

But strangely enough, I've always been drawn to it, maybe in the same way that you can't help rubber-necking when you pass an auto accident. I couldn't understand why, until recently I came across the work of Catherine Keller. Her book "Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances." Keller has given me a new perspective on what the apocalypse of climate change could mean for humanity and for our planet.

Let me give you some context for the Book of Revelation and why, with all its faults and flaws, it's an important read for us as we grapple with our 21st century fears about the end of the world.

The Book of Revelation was a series of letters written approximately around 96 CE by a Christian named John, not the Gospel author John, who was imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos. His audience was the seven emerging Christian communities.

John's letters, written in coded language, were in part a kind of political ad, sharply critical of Emperor Domitian, who's cultic practice and martyrdom of Christians contributed to the utter corruption of the Roman Empire. However, the book's symbolism and bizarre images also represented a cry of full-throated despair over what John saw as a time of collapsing civilization, devoid of moral responsibility and Christian values. Chapter after chapter, he leads the reader into ever more symbolic circles of anguish and destruction, redeemed only by the triumphant return of Christ, who will set all things aright again. For John, that was the only force powerful enough to save the world and begin anew.

Revelation has been so thoroughly and successfully co-opted by the religious right that progressives haven't had any other interpretation to offer. Keller, however, offers us another way

to think about the Apocalypse. *Apokalypsis*, is actually the Greek word for revelation, which means literally “removal of the veil.” This ancient reference describes the moment when the bride’s veil is lifted and she is seen for the first time by the bridegroom. It doesn’t signify the end of the world.

On the contrary, it means not to close, but to dis/close.¹ It is a chance to open our eyes to what is possible – what is lovely – what is lasting and what is REAL.

So what *is* being revealed in the Book of Revelation about us, right now? What it reveals goes deeper than any one particular election. Our much-discussed partisan divides unveils a theological divide as well – those who are concerned with *this world and this planet* and those whose theological imagination about the next world cause them to care less about the actual Apocalypse that human kind is facing. has nothing to do with the metaphorical stories from John of Patmos.

Keller writes that “*John is not predicting future facts but revealing fatal patterns. Might facing the Apocalypse in its ancient intensity help us face apocalypse in our own time....*” *Such facing would not mean more recognition, submission, acquiescence.*

It means to confront the forces of destruction: to crack open, to disclose a space where late chances, last changes remain nonetheless real chances.”²

“Nonetheless – real chances.” In our faith tradition, we do not believe in abandoning the work of this world in favor of some paradisiacal next. We don’t deny the realities we see around us either because of political pressure or a theological belief that this world should be destroyed in order to make way for a new utopia.

No, nor do we have the luxury of despair. Instead, I’ve been sobered by the insights of Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, in a 1990 essay entitled “After the Apocalypse.” And by a sermon response to Parker by another of my colleagues, the Rev. Josh Pawlek³. Parker critiques the popular religious notion of a coming apocalypse, a divinely wrought moment of great violence and destruction after which a new heaven and a new earth will emerge out of the ruins of the old.

She says humanity needs to let go of this myth in all its forms. She suspects—and I agree—that this kind of spiritual *looking forward* (even in its liberal form) prevents us from engaging in an honest spiritual *looking backward*, an honest, collective accounting of where we’ve been.

¹ Keller, Catherine. Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Changes, Pre-Scroll.

² Keller, Catherine. Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Changes, Chapter: Prescroll, Location 132, Kindle Reader.

³ Pawelek, Rev. Josh. “The Place We Require Humans” 10/09/11. <https://uuse.org/the-place-we-require-of-humans-2/#.Y25sHTFKiFs>

This kind of spiritual *looking forward* prevents us from beginning a deeply-felt, collective process of atonement for and healing of the deep wounds of the past—an atonement and healing that must take place if humanity is to have a future worthy of our *looking forward*.⁴

Countering specifically those who look forward to a final, violent apocalypse, Parker says, essentially, *Come on! Haven't we had enough apocalypse already?* She says, “We are living in a post-slavery, post - Trail of Tears, post-Holocaust, Post-Hiroshima , post-Vietnam, world.”

And, I would a post 9-11, post War on Terror – post...” For so many people on this planet, hasn't the apocalypse already come?

She says, “We are living in the aftermath of collective violence that has been severe, massive and traumatic. The scars from slavery, genocide, and war mark our bodies.” For so many communities on this planet, isn't the apocalypse already here? She says, “We must relinquish our innocence and see the world as it is.... We must notice the breakdown, sorrow, and legacies of injustice that characterize our current world order. From this place of honesty, we must discover how we can live among the ruins.”[\[5\]](#)

This is what apocalypse really is – to see the world from a place of honesty and learn how, as the poet Adam Zagajewski says, “to praise the mutilated world.” And I would say even more than praise, we must build our spiritual capacity to love it enough to save it. And that is why I keep coming to church and that is why I believe in the gathered community as one instrument of our planet's salvation. Not the Risen Christ – not the Final Battle of Armageddon – but of this and every religious and spiritual community who's collective power can and does change the world.

And in so doing, I believe in the metaphorical flourish written in the book of Revelation that you heard in this morning's reading. It seems impossibly naïve to imagine that there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain but John of Patmos wasn't concerned with facts at this point – it's feelings that he was expressing. It's a vision of what the world COULD be like and it's not unlike what we envision ourselves when we talk about Beloved Community.

When we imagine a world without the Great Pacific Garbage Patch or the Amazon Rain forests being decimated or the Colorado River finally drying up to a desert bed. It's the world we envision where George Floyd survived and thrived. It's the world we envision where we face our history with honesty and humility; with joyful reparations to communities which have been harmed. It's not utopia – but it's heaven.

But first, we have some work to do because as the poet Lynn Ungar reminds us, “we are lined up on the track, person after bound person in an endless chain. And, there is no hero to ride in on a white horse--

⁴ Ibid.

We are the heroes of our own destiny.

We are the ones that have to gnaw at the ropes of the person ahead of us.

I must confess, it's a very dystopian image – one that I can imagine in a sci-fi film about the not too distant future.

Yet, I think about the person on the chain behind me, gnawing with all their might on MY ropes to free ME. Why on earth would we do that for one another? Certainly survival and self-preservation, knowing that if we don't, we will all fall victim to the on-coming train of climate change. But I think there's another reason too – one that is both overstated and under-realized--and that is love.

Because if I am tied to this metaphorical train track about which Lynn Ungar writes, I am suddenly aware of all of the things I love – and love deeply. Not only my friends and family-- my husband and stepdaughter and son-in-law and my grandchildren, but the tiny flowers near the tracks and the great oak trees in the forests on either side and the animals which inhabit them and maybe the last bumblebee who I can see pollinating those flowers.

And my heart bursts with all that I cannot save and so I try harder with everything I do have - my bound hands and feet, my teeth, my body and my heart to ensure that all of us – all of us on this endless chain of being – are freed not by supernatural intervention – but by the very force of our love for one another and for this one, precious, and beautiful planet we inhabit. May it be so. Amen.