

August 24, 2008

Revelation 21:1

Reading Revelation Again: The Dream of God

This past week I was listening to NPR on my way in to work. People were calling in to share their reactions to the debate between John McCain and Barack Obama that was hosted by Pastor Rick Warren at his Saddleback church in Orange County, California. I had just gotten back from vacation and hadn't known about the debate and so I was curious to hear about how it had gone.

The responses from listeners were interesting. Some were distressed that an evangelical pastor had enough clout to summon two presidential candidates to their first debate. Some were delighted that the church provided a forum for candidates to share some of their deeply held religious convictions. Some were concerned that religion and politics were becoming too closely intertwined.

But one caller made a statement that I found deeply troubling. He started out by identifying himself as a non-believer and then went on to say how uncomfortable he was voting for any candidate holding strong Christian convictions, because believers expect the world to end soon and therefore have no real stake in preserving the environment or working for social justice. If we are living in the final days, why bother cleaning up pollution or eradicating poverty? All that matters is that you've accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and will be delivered on the Day of Judgment and saved from the wrath of God.

That was his perception of the Christian perspective. And it is one that is becoming increasingly popular in our culture today. A US News and World Report Survey revealed that one-third of Americans believe the world will end soon.

Our culture is becoming increasingly preoccupied with apocalyptic messages. Even the recent Pixar animated movie, "Wally", portrays a cataclysmic moment when the earth has become uninhabitable and has to be abandoned. It is rated PG and portrays no graphic violence, but the premise behind the storyline is deeply disturbing. The earth has become so polluted and so overpopulated that everyone has to be taken aboard a giant spaceship to live in outer space while a fleet of robot trash compactors work to clean up the mess we've left behind. I really liked the movie. The animation is fantastic and it is full of funny scenes, but think about the significance of the message. The end of life as we know it has moved from the genre of science fiction and religious fanaticism to children's animation movies and mainstream culture.

From the unbridled optimism of the 1960's, we've grown increasingly pessimistic. Today's post-boomer generation is the first generation to grow up believing that they won't ever get to enjoy the same standard of living that their parents did.

When I was in high school, I remember scoffing at Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey was convinced that the end of the world was imminent because he could see the visions in the book of Revelation being fulfilled in contemporary events. He saw the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as triggering the era spoken of in Revelation when Israel lived in her own land. The opening of the sixth seal in Rev 6:12 and the subsequent earthquake and darkening of the sun Lindsey interpreted as a thermonuclear exchange. When the sixth angel blows the trumpet and unleashes an army from the east numbering two hundred million in Rev 9:13, Lindsey deduced it must refer to the rise of Communist China. The giant locusts with tails like scorpions and wings that make a noise like many chariots in 9:7-10 must

be a reference to a type of attack helicopter. The ten-horned beast from the sea in Rev 13 Lindsey saw as a reference to the European Economic Community that was then approaching ten member nations.

What he was writing seemed so absurd to me that I couldn't imagine anyone taking Lindsey's book seriously, but today the Left Behind series of novels on "the rapture" by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have become national best sellers. Even if Lindsey was a bit far fetched in his interpretations, lots of people seem to agree with his basic premise: God is just about out of patience and will soon unleash the fury of divine wrath - the likes of which the world has never before seen. The unbeliever whose call I heard on NPR would have his worst fears confirmed if he stepped into many of our churches today. The central message of the gospel they proclaim is: the end of the world is at hand, repent and believe in Lord Jesus so that you can be taken up in the rapture and be saved from the wrath to come.

But that is not the way the Christian story ends. As we heard this morning in our reading from the closing chapters of the bible, the book of Revelation is not about the destruction of the world, it is about the redemption of the world. It is not a book that calls us to relinquish our cares for the world and the people who inhabit it as we prepare to be taken up into heaven. Its message is about God's dream for this earthly world, and it challenges all of us to make God's dream our own.

The book of Revelation is frightening to many of us. It is full of violent visions, symbolic numbers and bizarre images of mythical creatures. But they are not predictions of the distant future. They are visions that came to a man named John living on the island of Patmos around the year 95 CE near the end of the reign of emperor Domitian. John wrote his visions in a book addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor at the end of the first century not to predict things that would happen in the distant future, but to warn them of the imminent danger they were facing. John saw that these communities of faith were on the verge of losing their vision of the future that God intended for the world, and submitting instead to the vision of domination and oppression imposed by the Roman Empire.

He didn't tell people to avoid getting involved in the affairs of the world because the end of the world was near. He wrote to encourage people to persevere in their efforts to live out their faith even in the face of oppression. The central theme behind the book of Revelation is the question: who will rule as Lord in your life? Will it be Caesar (who is symbolized as the ten horned beast) or will it be Christ (who is symbolized as the Lamb that was slain but now lives)?

Revelation completes the dream of God from the beginning of creation. In the opening chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we have the story of paradise lost when the first man and the first woman hide themselves from the presence of God because they are ashamed. But in the passage we read today from the closing chapters of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, paradise is restored. It is the most intimate of all scenes in the Bible. God dwells among the people, wiping every tear from their eyes, healing their sorrows and pains, and delivering them from death.

It is not a celestial vision that promises a future somewhere far away on the distant clouds of heaven. It is an earthly vision, a holy city where all the people dwell together in unity and peace. And it is a universal vision. The city of God exists not for itself alone, but for the healing of the nations. Its gates are open to everyone, and anyone who is thirsty can come and drink from the spring of the water of life.

In his poem entitled, "Dreams," Langston Hughes wrote:

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Dreams are the invisible bonds that join our lives together. Without shared dreams, we live in lonely isolation. The dreams that we share give us the confidence of knowing that we want the same things, that we are working towards the same ends, that we are moving together towards the same destination. We can overcome difficult obstacles, endure painful hardships, make tremendous sacrifices, face incredible challenges - as long we hold on to the dreams that we share.

So don't be afraid of the Revelation of John. God's dream does not end with the destruction of the world. God's dream ends with the world redeemed in love, and day by day we are called to make God's dream our own. Amen.