

Waiting on the World to Change – sermon by Marilyn Matevia, Holy Trinity,
12/23/12

prayer of the farm workers' struggle - césar e. Chávez

Show me the suffering of the most miserable;
So I will know my people's plight.

Free me to pray for others;
For you are present in every person.

Help me take responsibility for my own life;
So that I can be free at last.

Grant me courage to serve others;
For in service there is true life.

Give me honesty and patience;
So that the Spirit will be alive among us.

Let the Spirit flourish and grow;
So that we will never tire of the struggle.

Let us remember those who have died for justice;
For they have given us life.

Help us love even those who hate us;
So we can change the world.

Amen.

Well, we're still here. December 21, 2012 has come and gone, and we're still here. The earth was not obliterated by a meteorite or a collision with another planet or the moon. The sun didn't explode. The lights didn't even flicker. We all

got up Saturday morning and gazed out on a post-Apocalyptic landscape that looked suspiciously like the pre-Apocalyptic landscape. Life, it appears, will go on for awhile, “same as it ever was... same as it ever was.”

A friend sent me a cartoon of a bored-looking Homer Simpson-like character sitting at his computer, with the caption: “worst Apocalypse ever.”

To be fair, we had some advance warning that this one might be a dud. Mark 13:32 and Matthew 24:36, for example, speaking of the end of time – “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Not “the Father and the Mayans;” just “the Father.” And most of us probably laughed off the December 21, 2012 end-of-the-world theory – which, we must point out, was not a Mayan prediction, but likely a misreading of their calendar. The Mayans had a long view of time, and several kinds of calendars. And it turns out that when time on the so-called “doomsday” calendar runs out, it simply starts over – much like any individual digit wheel on your car’s odometer. So... no doomsday. But maybe we secretly allowed ourselves a moment of thinking “what if the world DOES end this week?” Maybe even a moment of thinking “you know, it wouldn’t be so bad, the timing is pretty good...” I know what I thought when I opened my student loan statement in Wednesday’s mail: “I could use an Apocalypse about now.” But we didn’t get one – not the Hollywood kind, anyway.

As Pastor Sandra pointed out a few weeks ago – just as we were beginning the Advent journey – there is a delicate balance, or a “tension” as she said, in the Gospel readings leading up to Christmas. First, we hear influences of the Apocalyptic tradition – a tradition exemplified in the old testaments book of Daniel, in chapters of Zechariah, Joel, parts of Isaiah, and Ezekiel, as well as in the new testament books of 2nd Thessalonians, 2nd Peter, and Judah. Apocalyptic teaching will usually depict a stark contrast between two distinct ages: the present age, with its turmoil, oppression, and suffering – and the age to come, with its promise of an entirely new and just order, wrongs made right, and suffering relieved and ultimately compensated. Listeners understand that the transition from the old order to the new in the Apocalyptic tradition is going to be terrifying, tumultuous and dramatic. In the first week of Advent, we read in Luke 21 (25-36): “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.” And we read: “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

But running alongside that apocalyptic tradition is a less dramatic, but no less revolutionary prophetic one. Prophets, remember, don't tell us what's going to happen in the future – not in the sense that a seer or soothsayer does; prophets tell us what's happening right now – what we aren't seeing, and what it means. They give us a vision of what could be, or should be, and a measure of how far we are from that ideal. When we think of prophets and prophecies, we think of Amos, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, Malachi, 2nd Isaiah, for example. Jesus, we have seen in these weeks, has a foot in each of these traditions – the prophetic and the apocalyptic. He makes apocalyptic references, but he preaches that the kingdom of God is at hand – that the transition to the new order is already underway. The way that Jesus resolves the tension between traditions, Allen Verhey points out, is by changing the apocalyptic expectations of his listeners. The apocalypse that he describes is not a sort of nationalistic hope for the Israelites' revenge. Instead, he describes a “great reversal” – as Verhey puts it – of the rampant, deeply embedded structures and practices of injustice, a reversal of conventional values and conventional social orders. Power, prestige, and wealth will have no value in the new order. The poor, the hungry, the grieving will be blessed and raised up. And in Jesus' ministry, he demonstrates that this is not just a pie-in-the-sky vision of the world to come; this is already happening: he heals the sick, restores sight, raises the dead, feeds the hungry multitudes, talks to all kinds of women in public spaces,

and eats and drinks with tax collectors, while he chides the powerful, the wealthy, and the self-important. “Many that are first will be last, and the last first,” “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Where does he get these radical ideas? One likely source? His own mother! You heard her radical song in the psalmody and the Gospel. ‘He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.’ I realized as I was preparing for today that I’ve kind of been on auto-pilot when it comes to thinking about Mary. First of all, in the Protestant tradition, we don’t talk about her very much. As Kathleen Norris has written, we drag her out at Christmas and we pack her back in the crèche box for the rest of the year. Our image of her is shaped by centuries of artists’ and hymn-writers’ renderings that depict her as quietly accepting, obedient, the virgin “meek and mild.” I confess, I never noticed what theologian Beverly Gaventa points out, which is that Mary appears more often and more strategically than any other figure in the Gospels except Jesus himself.¹ And I’m starting to wonder if I just slept through the Magnificat every year. Yes, it’s part song of

¹ The annunciation, Magnificat, nativity of course; the presentation of Jesus at the temple (when Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her soul), her search when 12-year old Jesus disappears in the temple, her role in the wedding at Cana, her presence at the foot of the cross, and finally in the “upper room” where followers gather to form the new church.

praise, but with its vision of – again – a Great Reversal, it's also part manifesto. Luther says the Magnificat “comforts the lowly and terrifies the rich.” And as Beverly Gaventa has pointed out, it puts Mary right in the tradition of prophets.

Something else I confess to not really registering in all these years of auto-pilot Advent. Mary's Magnificat very closely parallels the song of praise offered centuries earlier by Hannah, in thanksgiving for the birth of her son Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Here's just a segment of Hannah's song: “The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.”

We might say there's a theme, here. That Great Reversal thing. God will do things differently. God will flip social orders. God will choose extremely unlikely people to accomplish the flipping of social orders. God will send a Messiah in the form of an infant, born to an unmarried virgin, in a stable. Indeed, your ways are not our ways, Lord; your thoughts are not our thoughts! We can agree on that.

But notice something else about these two praise songs. Hannah sings in the present tense, assuring us that these things are being done. Mary sings in the past tense, as if – as Beverly Gaventa says, “the gospel itself were an accomplished

fact.”² Both of these ideas are quite lovely, but maybe – how to put this delicately, and without getting struck by lightning – perhaps a little premature? As a vision for a new world order... I’m on board. I want that, too. But the evidence that it’s already happening?... seems a bit sparse. Legislators are still using their positions to advance their own interests, at the expense of others’ lives and well-being. Calls for financial responsibility and austerity always seem to target programs for the most vulnerable before they consider sacrificing benefits and privileges for those who already have more than they need. Corporations ship their manufacturing overseas and then pretend not to know about the safety hazards and labor abuses that keep their labor costs down, or the environmental destruction that keeps their material costs down. I’m sympathetic to Annie Dillard who writes in her book *For the Time Being*: “‘He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.’ ... When was that? I missed it.”³

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is coming, or that it’s already here, or that it’s among us... As Allen Verhey has written, “That Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God is certain, but what he *meant* by that is

² Gaventa, 59.

³ *For the Time Being*, 85.

a matter of considerable dispute.”⁴ No kidding. It’s like a Zen Buddhist koan: if it’s among us, does that mean we’re IN it, or does it mean we ARE it? And if it’s already here, then what are we waiting for?

Let’s think back, for a second, to how badly we mucked up reading the Mayan calendar. We Western rationalists see time in a linear dimension – time marches on – and we assume that everyone sees it the way we do. (Of course.) The possibility of different perspectives on time? Does not compute. And the prospect of living with utter, incomprehensible, slightly irrational mystery – with no clear, simple answer? Gives us hives. In a column for Beliefnet a few years ago, Diana Butler Bass wrote: “If we enter the Advent journey with a different understanding of time, the apocalyptic texts speak afresh... (reminding) us of the mystery of God’s redemptive time: Jesus has come; Jesus comes; Jesus will come. This is the dance of time, grace-filled steps that enact God’s vision that the end-times are all times; that all times are the end-times. In this spirit of times-enfolded-in-time, we walk through Advent. Jesus has been born, but we act as if we are still waiting. Christ will return, yet Christ has already come.”⁵

Well, that clears things up.

⁴ Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament*, 11.

⁵ <http://blog.beliefnet.com/progressiverevival/2009/11/advent-apocalypse-now.html>

But either way – kingdom already here, or kingdom on the way – there is the work of the kingdom for us to do. That work is *preparing* the way, tending, nurturing, *being* the kingdom. And we do know this much about the kingdom. It is big. According to the apocalyptic texts in Ephesians and Colossians, it is cosmic. It is all creation. The work of the kingdom is all creation.

So, indeed, what *are* we waiting for?