

Extra-Ordinary Time
November 19, 2017, Toronto United Mennonite Church
by Jeff Taylor

Sermon Scripture:
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Good News Translation (Taylor's amended version)

My friends, here is hardly any need to write you about either the timing or the sacred events concerning the Lord's appearing. For you yourselves know very well that the Day of the Lord will come the way a thief comes unannounced in the night. When people are saying, "We have achieved peace and security," then suddenly destruction will hit them! It will come as suddenly and inescapably as labour pains come to a pregnant woman.

But you, friends, are not in the darkness, and that day should not take you by surprise like a thief. All of you are people who belong to the light, who belong to the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, we should not be sleeping like the others; we should be awake and sober. For it is at night when people sleep; and at night when they get drunk. But we belong to the day, so we should be sharp-minded.

We must wear faith and love like it was protective armour, and hope of salvation as a helmet. For God has not chosen us, his followers to suffer his anger, but to possess salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us in order that we might live together with him, whether we are alive or dead when he comes. So just keep encouraging and helping one another exactly as you are already doing.

Sermon:

Perhaps you'll remember that in church calendar terms, we have been in and are now nearing the end of "ordinary" time, this is time that is not associated with any special events such as advent, Christmas, epiphany, lent, easter, or pentecost. During this time we've been mostly relying on the New Common Lectionary to guide us through the bible as we will do this morning. The scriptures dictated by the lectionary will take us into some extra-ordinary territory this morning. All of the permitted passages have something to do with with endings and the shifting of types of time: in short, with apocalypse.

Apocalypse. What visions come to mind when you hear that word? Perhaps ones like this early renaissance triptych by Hans Memling of the Day of Judgement.

https://www.artbible.info/images/memling_oordeel_grt.jpg

We see Jesus with his feet upon the orb that represents the earth as he sits on the heavenly sphere that ancient people believed separated the earth from all the stars that circled it. With his right hand he signals peace to the faithful "sheep" of his pasture who are directed by the arch-angel (in a very posh suit of armour) to cross the divide to the right panel of the painting where they walk up the stairs of a medieval castle en route to heaven, accompanied by angelic lutists. With his lowered left hand Jesus turns away the faithless "goats" who the angel shovels off towards the demons waiting to drag the condemned down to hell.

Throughout most of the church's history, even to this day, this has been a widely held idea of how God will wrap up human history, in black and white judgement. This image isn't without some biblical support. But it isn't the only way the bible's teachings about things at "the end" can be painted.

The word apocalypse doesn't necessarily have anything to do with anything ending or anyone being judged. The word itself simply means to uncover or reveal. It appears in the Greek NT maybe 20 to 30 times depending on which variations of the word you count. It isn't in our passages this morning.

The way it is used in the NT often suggests that the revealing of Jesus as Lord of the multiverse is somehow final - that human time is final - but apocalypse doesn't always carry that association. Sometimes this revealing is associated with a judgement of the living and the dead - with separating the sheep from the goats, but not always. Sometimes this revealing initiates Jesus' reign over a peaceable kingdom, but not always. One may even speak of an apocalyptic type of literature that possesses some or all of these features - the most obvious example being the last book of the NT which we protestants label, The Revelation of Jesus Christ, and which our forebears in the Roman church simply call, The Apocalypse. But usually these eruptions of apocalypticism are seeded throughout the bible amongst other kinds of writing. Some scholars write of certain characters as being apocalyptic, John the baptist for example. But it is very difficult to say that Jesus or even our author this morning, Paul, are themselves apocalyptic overall.

That's a lot to consider and we're not going to consider hardly any of it. My statement of delimitations is that I have no intention of laying out any plan for the end of human time on this or any other planet, nor how, when, where, or why the Lord might in any sense be revealed, again. The reason I can restrict my responsibility so drastically is because Paul did the same in his letter to the Thessalonians. So no grand plan will be revealed this morning. What we can do is notice what the Thessalonians' concerns were, what Paul said about them, and what, if anything, we can find in their story to correct, encourage, or enlighten us.

So to the text: Now the first sentence of this section leaves me wondering what Paul's tone or intention is here. Most commentators take him literally to mean that these folks have already been well instructed "about the timing and the sacred events concerning the Lord's appearing." And maybe that's so. But it also could be - bear with me here - one of those ways we speak when we need a way to get out of having to discuss something and we say, "I hardly need to tell you . . ." which at once compliments the listener for their awareness (which they and we know they don't really possess) but which also buys us the right not to have to go into detail.

But whether Paul has previously laid out for the Thessalonians some larger plan or not, he doesn't do it here because that isn't really their concern. They are not as much worried about the kronos - the timing - of things (as in, "On what day will the world end?") as they are about the kairos - the meaning of sacred events. Specifically, they are concerned about those they love who have been waiting with them for the Lord's appearing but who have now "fallen asleep"? What about believers who died before the Lord's coming? Have they missed the chance to be with Jesus in the Kingdom of Heaven? No, Paul assures them, "For God has chosen us to possess salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, whether we are alive or dead when he comes." Okay, problem solved! Fabulous! Where's the coffee.

Not so fast, Thessalonians and Torontonians: Paul may have assured us about one problem, one which we moderns may not have been as troubled by anyway; but like any good teacher, he has put another problem in front of us, one sure to trouble us all equally no matter what slice of the multiverse timeline we inhabit. Namely, what to do with whatever time we have? In an expanded riff on day vs. night, sleep vs. awake, Paul spins the euphemism of "sleep" (death) into an analogy for attentiveness and puts the responsibility to be ready and awake at the Lord's appearing not on those who have died, but on those who are still alive.

The Thessalonians are worried about those who have died before Jesus has appeared to them; but Paul comes back with, those who have fallen asleep will be taken care of, but let's talk about your sleepiness.

And then he assures even the living that they won't, or at least shouldn't have any reason to, miss an activity of a revealing of the Lord since they are not just alive in body, but also in awareness. That as God's folk they and we are "people of who belong to the light, who belong to the day." "So then," he challenges, "we should not be sleeping like the others (other living people); we should be awake and sober."

As Christians Paul assures us we don't need to worry about the the timing of the Lord's revealing. But we need to know that the kind of time we're accustomed to can't last. Ordinary time is nearly over. Or it IS over ever since the Lord first appeared to us.

So be awake, be aware, take this time seriously. Anyone's ordinary time can collapse in on them in a second. Let's not let it catch us unprepared. We know it is coming, we know it is already happening.

Now be awake and alert to what? That leads us into a whole series of sermons. But for now we can say this: it can't just be about which judges will uphold or overturn a decision on a woman's right to control what goes on in her own body; or a devotion to the text of the bible that is so enslaving that it dulls our ears to the voice of a still living still speaking God - who may have a new word for the church about who may love and marry who. Even if one considered these areas of justice/injustice, surely to God they cannot be the only ones nor the most pressing.

If you really want to talk about "apocalyptic" issues, the global nuclear arsenal and the pending climate/food crisis are the two truly global disasters that could end human history. And do not think God will rescue us from our own evil denigration of her creation. We've been given incomprehensibly complex problem solving machines just beneath these thick skulls of ours and we're expected to be awake, alert, sober, and prepared enough to care for our mother earth and one another.

We solved the problem of an eviscerated Ozone layer and we can fix these problems as well, but we'll need to do so quickly. Perhaps our little congregation can find some way to more effectively set the example while we add our voice to the chorus calling governments to act to protect our species. All is not lost, nor is there any reason to believe that the annihilation of human beings is the will of God.

The self-destructive apocalypse preachers of American-style evangelicalism who see all of our human failings as part of God's divine plan mistake God's all-knowingness for some sort of all-wantingness. God doesn't want evil and devastation for any of us and certainly not for all of us. God has no plan for the destruction of our species; if that happens it will have been our plan. We've been given life and conscience - that is, we are with (con) science (knowlege). We have the knowledge we need to care for each other. The only judgement God needs to make is whether or not we did that.

When your time, or mine, or our time in this realm will come to a close no one can predict and I don't believe God has pre-chosen any of those times. God will faithfully walk with us, showing us the example of Jesus and calling us to faithfulness; but God looks to us to know the right timing and the sacred events concerning the Lord's appearing. We choose. But at some point we run out our own clock for some decisions. Ordinary time is ending; now comes a time of revealing ourselves to Jesus even as he has been revealed.