

Apocalypse Now
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First Reading

The Book of Revelation – Chapters 5-22 (edited)

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll, sealed with seven seals...I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals...and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer. When he opened the second seal...out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth...When he opened the third seal...I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand...When he opened the fourth seal...I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him...When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given...When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood...When the Lamb opened the seventh seal...the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever"...And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work.

Second Reading

From the Introduction to *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*

By Alice Walker

There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom. Vivid. Alive. One might be blown to bits in such a moment and still be at peace. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the mountaintop. Gandhi dying with the name of God on his lips. Sojourner Truth baring her breasts at a women's rights convention in 1851. Harriet Tubman exposing her revolver to some of the slaves she had freed, who, fearing an unknown freedom, looked longingly backward to their captivity, thereby endangering the freedom of all. To be such a person or to witness anyone at this moment of transcendent presence is to know that what his human is linked, by a daring compassion, to what is divine. During my years of being close to people engaged in changing the world I have seen fear turn into courage. Sorrow to joy. Funerals into celebrations. Because whatever the consequences, people, standing side by side, have expressed who they really are, and that ultimately they believe in the love of the world and each other enough *to be that* – which is the foundation of activism.

Apocalypse Now Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister

My mother was born and raised on a small farm in northern Indiana. Though she is now a retired Unitarian Universalist minister, she tells stories of itinerant preachers traveling through the land every summer, setting up shop for as long as there were wretched souls to save. Her whole family – her two sisters, two brothers, her mother and her aunt – would attend the tent revival meetings every evening for a week on those hot August nights. My mother grew up in the 1930's and 40's, in the midst of the Great Depression and World War II. I have no doubt that the certainty of the evangelistic Christian message of God's wrath against the unrighteous, and of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ was a great comfort to some people during those tumultuous and uncertain times.

As she became more liberal, my mother moved far away from those strict messages of exclusion. She no longer divided people between the "saved" and the "damned." In some ways though, she retained some of those childhood fatalistic concerns. She raised me to be mindful of my actions, and as I look back, I see my mother's teachings only in the light of good parenting. Yet some of her methods, and some of the things she told me, were hard to accept. Every decision I make, she told me, will have a profound influence on the next. The message I *heard* (though I admit, it may not be the words she actually spoke!) was that if I stole a piece of candy when I was 8, I would end up in prison by the time I was 20. For as open and liberal as she had become, it seemed to me that this progression of thought was discouragingly fatalistic! Another thing she told me, though never in seriousness, only in the context of telling me what her parents told her, was this: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

As much as I despise this saying, I cannot help but recognize some truth in those words. We can intend to lose weight or exercise all we want, but if we continue to eat potato chips and watch TV, our desire means very little. If we intend to support homosexual marriage or speak out publicly against the erosion of personal freedom and privacy, but sit at home reading the morning paper shaking our heads, then our desire will have no effect on injustice in the world.

In the reading we heard earlier, Alice Walker describes the transforming power of activism. "Whatever the consequences," she writes, "people, standing side by side, have expressed who they really are, and that ultimately they believe in the love of the world and each other enough *to be that* – which is the foundation of activism." So what does the apocalypse have to do with my mom, or Alice Walker, or Unitarian Universalism? Well, with the *intention* of getting us all on the same page, these are a few of my thoughts about my own understanding and interpretation of Jewish and Christian scriptures.

As it comes to us, the Bible (both the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures) is a powerful collection of stories and truths developed with the *intention* to help guide humanity on a path of moral responsibility in relationship with the earth, other humans, and with the origin of the universe. I say these scriptures were developed and sustained with the *intention* to help guide humanity because, as I mentioned, intentions do not always bear fruit in action.

As one of the powerful collection of truths, the final book of the Christian scriptures is titled "The Revelation to St. John the Apostle" – otherwise known as "The Book of Revelation." On a side note, the "St. John" of the title is not the same John who is supposed to have authored one of the four gospels.

In the whole Bible, the Book of Revelation is the only collection of writings that is entirely apocalyptic. The word “apocalypse” comes from a Greek word meaning “revelation,” to designate the contents of the book. Apocalyptic literature is usually a first-person narrative in which the author recounts a vision about a heavenly world, the future, or both. Jewish apocalypses, especially passages in the books of Daniel and Isaiah, often describe a sharp distinction between the present age of evil and an imminent future age of blessing. The conflict between a righteous minority and a wicked majority is understood as representing a clash between God and Satan. After a period of intense conflict and great suffering, God will decisively intervene in history to vindicate and reward God’s people and punish or eliminate their earthly oppressors. Many Jewish apocalypses use a great deal of symbolism, often quite bizarre, and the Book of Revelation is no exception.

The author of Revelation, in the opening passages of the book, relates that he is on Patmos, an island 70 miles off the coast of what is now Turkey. He describes himself as a brother in faith with the early Christian communities on the mainland, sharing their persecution at the hands of the Romans. As in other apocalyptic literature, the author uses a vast amount of symbolism and metaphor.

When read and interpreted literally, as do many fundamentalist Christians, the story of John’s revelation becomes downright frightening – a vast archive of imagery snatched up by Hollywood for movies like the 1976 film, “*The Omen*,” and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s 1999 film, “*End of Days*.” But because first century Christians were only small bands of a Jewish sect outlawed by the Roman government, they often used coded language to communicate and share their beliefs. In this context, “Babylon” often referred to Rome, the “mark of the beast” (the number 666), is the numeric value in Hebrew of the name of the oppressive Emperor Nero Caesar, and the infamous “four horsemen of the apocalypse” are metaphors for the warfare, famine, and death brought about by the Romans.

In a society like first century Rome and Israel, or 1950’s era McCarthyism in the United States (or even as it is in many ways now with the Patriot Act and its infringement on civil liberties), oppressed people who are militarily and legally outnumbered and outmaneuvered turn to secret meetings and coded language merely to survive. But the thing is, in the 4th Century, Christianity transitioned from small sects of Jewish mystics to an organized state religion. The metaphors and codes of a small group in ancient circumstances do not translate well to 21st century circumstances in a global religion with millions of adherents.

Yet it is astounding how literal interpretations of the Book of Revelation continue to remain so vibrantly alive in the mind of our culture. Most prominently we can see this in the enormously popular “Left Behind” book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The title, “Left Behind,” is a reference to all the people on earth “left behind” after God gathers the righteous people to heaven in a literal interpretation of the rapture. The “Left Behind” series attracts more and more readers as each new book is published. The original series consists of twelve books. In addition, the “Left Behind” library consists of graphic novels, three Prequel novels, three books in the “Military Series,” three books in the “Political Series,” three books in a “Soon Series,” and 40 books in the “Kid Series.” Since the first “Left Behind” book was published in 1995, over 60 million copies of the series have been sold worldwide, with each new publication topping New York Times bestseller lists.

One reviewer from the Washington Post writes this about the Left Behind books: “Central to their emotional appeal is an intense nostalgia for what we have lost, not through the imposition of God’s judgment but through the increasingly amoral existence that preceded our

fall. Like most apocalyptic sagas, the series feeds on the desire to resurrect an imaginary past that is simpler and, of course, lacking in moral and social ambiguity. But LaHaye and Jenkins assert the redemptive power of an otherwise bleak take on Biblical prophecy: Those left behind have a reprieve, one last chance to make things right with themselves and with their God.”

It is this last point that captures my attention the most, the point where the Book of Revelation resounds with meaning for me, and *may* even be a point where my Unitarian Universalist faith and the faith of a Christian fundamentalist may intersect. It is not my desire or goal to demonize the Christian Right. In fact, the more we see the Christian Right, or any conservative fundamentalist belief as an enemy, the more we will defeat our own stated UU affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of each person, as well as our recognition and value of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. If it is our goal to engage with all of humanity in a struggle for justice, then it cannot be our goal to belittle, demonize or dismiss those with whom we disagree.

For me, the most compelling aspect about the Book of Revelation is the story it tells and the opportunity it presents for ongoing human redemption. I’m not talking about some cheesy sorrowful Jesus gazing longingly up to the sky, or the lightning bolt wrath of an ancient God. I’m talking about the manner in which we chose to live and act out our daily lives, from the way we love and argue with our partner, to the attitude and manner in which we conduct ourselves at work, to justice and compassion we weave into and create out of our very lives.

Broadly speaking, the story of the Book of Revelation is about how each person, at the end of time, will be called before God and the book of our lives will be opened. With God, we will review our entire life, and we will be judged not on our *intentions*, but on our *deeds*. For me, the climax of the story of the apocalypse, of revelation, is not the imagined dramatic storm of hellfire and brimstone and dead bodies being sucked into the sky on an alien beam like a scene from a 1950’s science fiction movie. Rather, the climax of this story, for me, is the intimate and ultimate conversation each person has with God at the end of time. It is the climax of one story about the human quest to make sense of our lives as we wrestle with and converse with our understanding of ultimate matters. I do not believe that a faith system requires a God – but I do believe our Unitarian Universalist faith requires that we strive to align our actions with our beliefs.

I suggest that the conversation with God “at the end of time,” as described in the Book of Revelation, is a metaphor for the conversations we have each day – with ourselves and with each other – as we question our beliefs and actions against what we consider to be of ultimate importance. I suggest to you that the apocalypse is here. Revelation is now. Right here, right now. This moment is in fact the end of time...and now, *this* moment is the end of time. Each moment of our lives is the end of time. In this manner, the apocalypse is always now. Revelation was not sealed two thousand years ago, but is ongoing and continues today. And though we do not believe we are sinners in the hands of an angry God, we may be able to believe that ancient stories from Jewish and Christian traditions can lead us toward a faith that reveals to us the importance of each day, and how in each moment of time we are accountable for all our deeds and our actions.

In the introduction to her book, “Anything We Love Can Be Saved,” Alice Walker writes, “All we own, at least for the short time we have it, is our life. With it we write what we come to know of the world. I believe the Earth is good. That people, untortured by circumstance or fate, are also good. I do not believe that people of the world are naturally my enemies, or that animals, including snakes, are, or that Nature is. Whenever I experience

evil...my deepest feeling is disappointment. I have learned to accept the fact that we risk disappointment, disillusionment, even despair, every time we act. Every time we decide to trust others to be as noble as we think they are. And that there might be *years* during which our grief is equal to, or even greater than, our hope. The alternative, however, is not to act, and therefore to miss experiencing other people at their best, reaching toward their fullness, has never appealed to me.”

Our faith does not require that some people be “left behind.” Our faith, based in the Universalist half of our religious heritage, affirms the radical notion of universal salvation: all of us make bad choices, but we also have what may be called a divinely human capacity for courage and compassion. In our work and our struggle for justice and compassion in the world, I do not think we must strive to be perfect. We have many flaws with which we must wrestle, and through which we are connected to other people all over the planet. Perfection is not the goal. As individuals, and as a liberal religious movement, we must honor the work and people who sustain us in our difficulties and pain. As individuals, and as a liberal religious movement, our striving is toward transformation, to turn what we imagine into reality.

We Unitarian Universalists have an invigorating history, and a current reality, of optimistic liberal religious belief in the goodness of the world. This is our liberal apocalypse, our revelation, our vision of what may be. Though we risk disappointment and despair as we strive to align our actions with our beliefs, may we open the way, again and again, to experience people at their best.

Benediction – the “Lord’s Prayer”

(Reportedly a translation directly from Aramaic to English)

Birther of the universe, of all radiance and vibration!
Soften the ground of our being and carve out a space within us
 where your Presence can abide.
Fill us with your creativity
 so that we may be empowered to bear the fruit of your mission.
Let each of our actions bear fruit in accordance with our desire.
Endow us with the wisdom to produce and share
 what each being needs to grow and flourish.
Untie the tangled threads of destiny that bind us,
 as we release others from the entanglement of past mistakes.
Do not let us be seduced by that which would divert us from our true purpose,
 but illuminate the opportunities of the present moment.
For you are the ground and the fruitful vision, the birth power and fulfillment,
 as all is gathered and made whole once again.