

“... until the moon is no more”

a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov. 21, 2021

based on Isaiah 43:16-21

By one account, on the last day of the year 999 the old Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome was thronged with a mass of trembling worshippers awaiting the end of the world. The pope was said to be there. Whether he was as anxious as the assembled rabble that some cataclysmic act of God was at hand on this, the last day of the first millenium, no one recorded. Of course, when midnight came round ... nothing happened. It was said that the congregation ran out into the streets of Rome, some shouting and cheering, others disappointed by the fact that they were still alive.

Apocalypticism and it's accompanying panic has been around for a long time. It is in the both the old and new testaments. The early Christian church, living under intense and sometimes cruel persecution, fervently prayed for Jesus to return and bring to an end the horrific ordeal they were enduring in his name.

Their graphic hopes, predictions and terrors have been passed on, misunderstood, and misused in every generation since.

Many thought the world was coming to an end in 1944 and that the anti-Christ was ... Franklin Roosevelt. How else could he have been elected four times? Some people actually believed that.

Crazier still is the idiocy currently spreading among fundamentalist Christian zealots that the Covid vaccine is “the mark of the beast.”

“If you are vaccinated” some warn, “you will never be saved.” Most evangelical preachers are trying to quash that nonsense, but it is popping up everywhere right now.

Even whackier, I read this week that in a recent poll, 28% of Republicans believe our former president will be reinstated as president before the new year. How the heck that is suppose to take place, I have no idea.

Now, most of these zealots, reading the biblical apocalyptic literature literally, long for the return of Jesus in the sky, and believe that a new temple will soon be built on the exact spot as the 1st century temple; the one leveled by the Romans in 70 AD.

They believe that several key events have already taken place, including the reinstatement of the nation of Israel in 1948. The rebuilt temple, they say, will be the capstone that will usher in a new age and the return of the Messiah.

The problem is there is a building on the spot—a very significant building—the Dome of the Rock, Islam’s third most sacred space.

Removing that would cause a pretty big stir, don’t you imagine?

I went to Israel in 1999, the people going through the check-point to the temple grounds who were most closely questioned were we Americans. The Israeli soldiers in charge of the crossing were terrified that some crazy American fundamentalist was going to strap dynamite to his body and try to blow up the Dome and, in some whacky way, force God to bring about a swift end to the world. I got a thorough pat-down and so did all the other ministers I was traveling with.

There are hundreds of thousands of Christian Fundamentalists who drool over the prospect of the end of the world. If you read their web sites as I have you will see that, for many of them, it can’t come too soon.

Maybe you have read Tara Westover’s best selling book, *Educated*. Tara grew up in an Idaho fundamentalist-survivalist household in which her father lectured his family on being ready for “the last days” everyday. Tara said she’d never seen him so excited in her life as he was in anticipation of the coming of Y2K back in 1999. Remember that one?

She said he was never so disappointed as he was on Jan. 1, 2000 when nothing --- absolutely nothing, happened as a result. Some people just have an appetite for catastrophe.

The Rev. Joanna Adams tells about seeing a sign in front of a bait shop on a country road in Georgia. "Smile!" it said. "Our God is a consuming fire." That is just NOT a thought that puts a smile on my face," she quipped. ("The End of the World As We Know It," sermon, 11/28/99)

A news reporter once called me in anticipation of some Christian fundamentalist end-of-the-world prediction that was then making the rounds. He asked me if the church I was pastoring was going to have an end-of-the-world observance.

The man was clearly looking for something juicy and was sorely disappointed when I told him we weren't into that kind of thing; that we Presbyterians were more concerned about how to live faithfully into the future. We weren't nearly as newsworthy as religious zealots, longing for an impending end.

Well, there is another way of looking at the future that is, in fact, genuinely at the heart of our faith tradition. Let me read again from this morning's text from the Prophet Isaiah, a letter written to a community of captive exiles in Babylon 2,400 years ago.

"Comfort, comfort my people says your God,"
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . .
Get you to a high mountain . . .
lift up your voices with strength
He will feed his flock like a shepherd
he will gather the lambs in his arms
Those who wait for the Lord shall
renew their strength
they shall mount up with wings
like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint."

Those words, meant to offer comfort, not panic, were written to a community of people who had run out of options for the future and had given up hope. Their situation could not have been more difficult.

They had no army. Their capital was in ruins, their leaders were either slaughtered or exiled, their temple had been leveled and they themselves were held captive in a foreign land, in a ghetto.

One can easily imagine those people spending time longing for the good old days, for how they imagined it used to be in Jerusalem when Solomon was King and their army was feared, when there was food enough for all, and their Temple, the glory of Israel, stood bright, gleaming in the sun.

Now, imagine how those people felt when the prophet, after he wrote words of comfort and tenderness, delivered these words:

Knock off the nostalgia!
Do not remember the former things, or
consider the things of old.
God is about to do a new thing,
now it springs forth, do you not
perceive it?"

The full text says, "Yes, the God of the Hebrews *did* make a safe path through the waters of the Red Sea for the escaping people during the exodus, and yes, God *did* kill the Egyptian soldiers who pursued them, drowning the lot of them," but look, God is creating a new path, a way out of exile in Babylon. This event is a gift to a whole new generation and is meant to enhance the lives, not just of those who read these words, but their children and grandchildren, too.

There is, in those words, a very important faith affirmation. When our resources are depleted, God's are not. When we've used up all our options, God has more. When we've given in to hopelessness, God comes with new possibilities, new hope, a new creation, a new future.

Faith, in this way of thinking, is not looking backward but forward, not sitting around the fire telling stories about how wonderful the 1950s were with “Leave It To Beaver” and “I Love Lucy” and 19 cent gasoline were, and how bad the present is, so isn’t it time for God to usher in a horrific end to history? No, the 1950s also had polio epidemics and the fear of atomic war.

No, it’s about being bullish about the future. It’s about getting ready to join God in the ongoing drama of creation right here on planet earth. It’s about taking on the challenges of human made problems like nuclear proliferation and climate change.

There is in these words a new way of honoring the past by remembering that God’s promise has always been about the future.

Allow me to repeat something I said in a prior sermon from the British theologian, John Taylor. He said, “There are two ways of looking at time ...

Is the source of time behind us, pushing us from history into the future?

Or is the source of time ahead of us, pulling us out of history into a new future . . . so that the present always has within it the seeds of hope?” (*The Go-Between God*, p.76-77).

It says, no matter how rich are our memories of the past, regardless of the comfort memories give us, in the future lay wonderful possibilities. In the future lies a chance for us to co-create with God a world that is better than any that has come before.

I mean, you have to take a long look at things. The world is a better place than it was a thousand years ago when life was “ugly, brutish and short.” Even a hundred years ago.

It’s certainly a better place for women and children, even though there are forces that threaten the advances that have been made to champion the rights of women and children. History always moves in zigzag fashion. Knowing this, we move forward with hope but cautiously.

Listen to these words on caution and hope on the occasion of a wedding from a woman named Judy Guyder of Big Sur.

I AM STANDING AT THE ALTAR yet again, getting ready to make another promise to love someone to the end. And I do love this man, but can I really promise to love him forever?

The music stops, and I ask him in a whisper if we can just promise to do our best and ask for compassion if we can't; if we can just say there are no guarantees, and that life may come in and interfere; if we can just say, "My God, I love you today," and hope that we can say it tomorrow and the next day and the next. I intend to love him forever, but what if I am not helping him have the best possible life somewhere down the line? I want to give him the gift of not promising.

He smiles and whispers back, "My God, I love you today."

We will celebrate a birth in five more weeks -- the birth of a child who, we traditionally believe, is "the light of the world."

Here, in November of 2021 the hope in that light, though flickering, still shines, and while the darkness of malice and ignorance threatens it, it has not overcome it.

Who knows what threats North Korea, or Russia, or domestic terrorists within our borders, or quickly melting glaciers hold for us. We are not to take anything for granted. We are, instead, to live intentionally, knowing that life is hard and that people who call themselves Christians are often deluded and are easily seduced by Cassandra's and fear mongers who misread the Bible – to all of our expense.

Let me end with an alternative understanding of the gospel that might best foit our crazy times. It's offered by David Roche.

David Roche was once a broken man. He was born broken; born with a severe facial deformity. I learned about him reading Anne Lamott's wonderful book, PLAN B. She is a big fan of David's.

Like Anne, he's a real hoot – when he speaks before groups he calls himself the pastor of “The Church of 80% Sincerity.” Here is how he describes it:

“We in the Church of 80% Sincerity [aren't big on] miracles, but we do believe that you have to stay alert, because good things happen. When God opens the door you've got to put your foot in. “Eighty percent is about as good as it's going to get. . . so twenty percent of the time you just get to be yourself.”

David's gospel is so subversive, says Anne Lammot, “so contrary to everything society leads us to believe – you know, that if you look good, you'll be happy, and have it all together, and you'll be successful and nothing will go wrong and you won't have to die and the rot won't get in.”

“When David insists you are fine exactly the way you are, you find yourself almost believing him. When he talks about unconditional love, he gives you a new lease on life, because the way he explains it, you may, for the first time, believe that *even you* could taste of this.

“As he explains it, in the Church of 80% sincerity everyone has to come to understand that unconditional love is a reality, but with a shelf-life of about eight to ten seconds. Instead of beating yourself up because you feel it only fleetingly, you should savor those moments when it appears.

As David puts it, “We might say to our beloved, ‘Honey, I've been having these feelings of unconditional love for you for the last eight to ten seconds. Or, ‘Darling, I'll love you till the very end of dinner.”

The future, the late Peter Gomes asserts, is a “blessing of God . . . The future is God's time.” That has enormous implications for how we live and it has deep and powerful implications for you and me personally. Our future—our time—the time we have left to live, whatever that happens to be, is time inhabited by God. Wherever we go, God will be there. Whatever happens to us, God will be with us. Amen