

Kate Amoss: November Sermon

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November 15, 1998

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[This sermon was preceded by the Baptism of Cassandra Willkens.]

Apocalypse. The word chills the blood. "Not a single stone will be left on another." It is a time when the old will be completely destroyed in order to make way for the new. "The past will not be remembered and will come no more to mind." I speak of apocalypse because the two texts from today are both in that tradition.

I do not think that it is useful to treat the stories as an accurate detailed prediction of the future but that does not mean that they are not true. The word apocalypse is derived from the Greek word to uncover. It is closely related to the word revelation, which is derived from the Latin root meaning to remove the veil. The prophetic visions of the end of time disclose the hidden aspects of reality.

November is a fitting month for this sermon as November is the month of apocalypse – the month of unveiling and uncovering. The first killing frost is in November. Last week my bright patch of zinnias became brown and brittle overnight. In November, the earth disrobes. Her bright shimmering garb of red and gold leaves falls to the ground. Naked trunks and limbs are exposed to the cold autumn light. The underlying structure of the world is again revealed – the hidden purpose of creation laid bare. All around us we can see trees anchored in the dark soil while their branches and twigs reach toward the sky. We can see the trees bridging the divide between

earth and heaven. Apocalypse is about dispelling illusion and seeing deeply into the marrow of existence.

In the gospel lesson today, Jesus is intent upon dispelling illusions. That which seems indestructible can in fact be destroyed, he tells us. He gives this sermon to his disciples as they gather around him outside of the great temple. While gazing at its strong walls, he tells them that not one stone will be left upon another. This is an important speech and his manner has a sense of urgency. Jesus knows that he will be arrested soon. He has made his final entrance into Jerusalem during Holy Week. "Take care," he tells them. "Keep this carefully in mind," he says. He is speaking as plainly as he can. He has abandoned his usual metaphors and parables. Jesus, Rabbi, is like the teacher who helps his favorite pupils prepare for the final exam. How can he give them hope and courage for the ordeal that lies ahead?

His words echo backward into history and forward into time. They recall the time of Babylonian exile and they foretell Jesus' death, the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70AD, and the martyrdom of the early Christians. Yet his words also speak of a distant more universal future as well as the immediate one. They are words that have caught the attention and passions of many people throughout the last two thousand years. Many in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Europe thought the end of the world was near and the coming of the new order close at hand. Enslaved, downtrodden people everywhere have found strength and comfort in his promises. By warning of difficulties, Jesus hoped to give patience and endurance to his people.

His words seem startlingly fresh and relevant today in the last years of the twentieth century: "His disciples asked Jesus, 'Teacher, when will this be that all is thrown down, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' And he said, '**Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name... Do not go after them. When you hear of**

wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for those things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.' Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.'" I, personally, find it hard not to wonder if perhaps he is speaking of now. I think of the recent destruction in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras where as much as eighty percent of the crops that feed the people have been destroyed and millions have been left without shelter. As we speak, a UN climate conference in Buenos Aires is coming to a close after two weeks of arduous talks about the very real dangers of global warming. Those who attended the UN conference passed a motion of solidarity with the victims of Hurricane Mitch, a storm which is feared could be a harbinger of future destruction wrought by ever-more-frequent severe weather in a warming world. I know that I don't even like to think about the possibilities, let alone talk about it. When I am too scared, I just feel numb and apathetic.

Joanna Macy is a teacher, scholar, and environmental activist who has gained my attention and respect for the way in which she confronts these issues. Her main focus of concern has been to understand the emotional and psychological dimensions of the environmental crisis. She wrote in a recent essay:

Until the late twentieth century, every generation throughout history lived with the tacit certainty that there would be generations to follow. Each assumed without questioning, that its children and its children's children would walk the same earth, under the same sky. Hardships, failures, and personal death were encompassed in that vaster assurance of continuity. That certainty is now lost to us, whatever our politics. That loss, unmeasured and immeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time. (Brown and Hillman, eds., Ecopsychology, p. 241.)

This loss inevitably leads to despair, guilt and rage. These are feelings that can paralyze us. The normal psychological response to overpowering emotions is disbelief, denial, and dissociation. The reality of the threat to our well being is difficult to grasp. Instead of acting, we debate the level of the threat. Dissociation allows us to go on with our lives as if nothing at all were amiss. I know that I disbelieve, deny, and dissociate. I resent doomsayers and turn my wrath on those who make me feel guilty. Psychological defenses can help us to survive in the short run but in the long run they sap us of energy. Constructive action becomes even more difficult.

This human tendency to feel helpless in the face of such a great loss is exactly the issue that Jesus is addressing in the passage from Luke. He is trying to give his followers a broader perspective so that they will not feel overwhelmed or alone. The time of difficulties is part of God's intentions, he tells his followers. Be discerning and do not be deceived by false prophets. Do not be frightened of persecution because persecution will offer you opportunities to bear witness. In this passage, it becomes clear that bearing witness is, in fact, god's deepest purpose for us.

But what does it mean to bear witness? It means stripping through our defenses and being willing to feel what we feel and see what we see. There is a story about Aldo Leopold, one of the most influential environmental thinkers of this century and the author of *Sand County Almanac*. Leopold began his career in the forestry service at the turn of the century. He, like everyone else, was deeply concerned that the deer had been overhunted and were low in numbers. In the early part of the century, the implicit concern of those who supervised the wilderness areas in the United States was how to best manage the land so it served the needs of its human visitors, in particular those who wanted to hunt. In order to bring back the deer population, the forestry service worked hard to eliminate the wolves and other natural predators. This was the

policy until 1944, when Leopold wrote an influential essay that he titled, "Thinking Like a Mountain:"

"A deep chesty bawl echoes from rimrock to rimrock as it rolls down the mountain and fades into the far blackness of the night," he began. "It is an outburst of wild defiant sorrow, and of contempt for all the adversities of the world. The deer, the coyote, the cowman, the hunter, in each the call instills some immediate, personal fear or hope. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf."

Leopold dated his own conviction that there was a deeper meaning in that howl from the day during his years in the Southwest when he had shot a wolf and watched it die:

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then and I have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.

In that moment, Leopold was able to see with his heart. In the subsequent decades, he brought a new ecological attitude to the Department of the Interior. The balance of nature has its own validity and beauty. His work laid the groundwork for the recent reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone.

The story of Mother Teresa is also a story of witnessing. Her ministry also began with the simple act of seeing. One morning she decided to pick up a woman dying in the street. She had no place to take her. She did not know what she would do next. In an interview Mother Teresa said:

The first woman I saw, I myself picked up from the street. She had been half eaten by the rats and ants. I took her to the hospital but they could not do anything for her. They only took her in because I refused to move until they accepted her. From there I went to the municipality and asked them to give me a place where I could bring these people because on the same day I had found other people dying in the streets. (p.91)

Just as Leopold had seen "something new to him" in the dying embers of the she-wolf's eyes so must Mother Teresa have seen something new in the eyes of the dying woman that she took in that day.

Sometimes the message is an image, not a story. There is a painting in the Lodge of the Carpenter that caught my attention and stayed with me during the weekend when I was on silent retreat this fall. In the picture, Jesus is being nailed to the cross. The perspective is jarring. The cross is on the ground. Christ's hand is stretched toward the viewer and it is impossible to avoid seeing the nail being driven into the flesh. Further back in the picture, Jesus' head is turned toward his hand. It seemed to me as I sat looking at the hand and the nail that the whole gospel could be reduced to this one painting. The gospel is about the truth, about seeing deeply into the hard reality of the crucifixion. Christ suffers with me and I must in turn suffer with Christ.

Yet in this strange, illogical, paradoxical faith we call Christianity, opening oneself to another's suffering is the beginning of re-opening one to joy. "Behold," says the Lord in Isaiah, "I make all things new." Aldo Leopold's later book, *Sand County Almanac*, is a celebration of wilderness. Mother Teresa's joy in her work was palpable to anyone who fortunate enough, as I was once, to be in her presence. Even in the midst of apocalypse, joy is still an option. We should know this by simply looking at Casey smile during coffee hour or by

watching any of our other young children in Seekers.

The psalm today says:

*The stone that the builder's rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.*

*This is the Lord's doing
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

The new temple is to be built with the rejected stone. This is wisdom borrowed from the ancient texts of alchemy, the great art of transformation. Transformation begins with this new way of seeing and valuing. The dying wolf was the cornerstone to Leopold's new life. The dying woman half eaten by rats and ants was the cornerstone to Mother Teresa's new mission. For us, Christ can be our cornerstone. Compassion, a word that means to feel with another, has the power to make all things new.

Joanna Macy, the environmental activist whom I quoted earlier has done some interesting work with communities of people so that they can again learn to feel and respond joyfully to the world around them. She has created the Council of All Beings, a collective mourning ritual that allows participants to work through their deeply repressed emotional responses to ecological disaster. She has found again and again that this ritual can release new hope, optimism and energy. Grief is the emotion that allows us to let go of our rage, guilt, and despair. In the teachings of Chinese acupuncture, November is the season of grief. Grief and apocalypse belong together.

Too often we imagine that grief is the same thing as rage, guilt, and despair just because we often feel those emotions when we grieve. To grieve is to feel those terrible feelings so deeply that they no longer have the same power over us. Tears are cleansing. They wash away the old and make way for

the new. Tears are precious. The Victorians would save tears in special little vials and send them to their loved ones. Tears clear out the passageway to our heart. By feeling utterly sorry for ourselves, we are once again able to feel sorrow for others. When we bear witness, we are seeing with the eyes of our heart, we are seeing with compassion. When we view all of creation with compassion, we become like the trees or like the mountains. Even as we are grounded in the everyday truth of the world around us, we still see with god's eyes and hear with god's ears. Like the trees and the mountains, we, too, become a bridge between heaven and earth, as well as a bridge between the past and the future. Once again, life can flow through us.

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Seekers Church:

A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

November 15, 1998

Baptism of Cassandra Rachel Nguyen Willkens

OPENING WORDS:

Marjory:

Baptism recognizes the grace of God living in all creation. God offers us the possibility of transformation, a continuing process of renewal of body, mind and spirit, which takes place within faith communities. We are here today to declare that God loves Casey and to offer ourselves as the instruments of that love in her life. So it is that Diane, Rachel and Covey bring Casey to Seekers

to be baptized.

Peter:

This morning the water for baptism is in an insulated bottle that Diane and Rachel brought back from Vietnam with Casey. These bottles are found everywhere in Vietnam, where safe drinking water is scarce and the fuel to make it hot enough for tea is expensive. Every morning, visitors to Vietnam find a bottle like this, full of safe, hot water, placed carefully outside the door of their hotel room. It is a sign that your hosts have taken care for your early morning nourishment and your health.

Just as this insulated bottle protects drinking water and keeps it hot enough to give life to the tea, let it be for us a symbol of God's care for our health and nourishment, and of our commitment to provide that health and nourishment to Casey.

PLEDGES:

Marjory:

A covenant is integral to a relationship with God, so today we state the responsibilities of parents and community to God and to this child. Diane and Rachel, I ask you now to affirm your covenant with God and with Casey.

Diane and Rachel:

We bring Casey before you today to acknowledge publicly our commitment to raise her in a Christian community. We view her baptism not only as a symbol of our commitment but as a covenant among all of us to teach her to seek God in her life. We pledge to raise Casey with an informed heart as well as an informed mind; to understand that only through empathy and compassion for others can we evoke the presence of God within us.

We call upon all the Seekers community to help us instill in Casey the significance of looking to God for spiritual

nourishment. We ask that each of you hold us accountable for our commitments to her. We seek your individual and collective help in nurturing her soul. As she grows to question and learns the power of choice, we hope that she will be able to answer her questions and make her choices based on a sense of faith, belonging and community.

Peter:

Covey, what will you do to help Casey grow up understanding God?

Covey:

As Casey's brother, I will help her understand God. I hope that all the Seekers children will be her friends and will support her as she grows.

Marjory:

As a community, let us affirm our covenant with God to love and care for Casey.

Community:

We witness and affirm Diane and Rachel's commitment to raise Casey in a Christian community. We hear and support Covey's request for Casey's embrace by the children of this community. We pledge our individual and collective support as they nurture Casey's growth journey.

BAPTISM:

Peter:

Baptism is the symbolic act of claiming our Christian heritage and place within the family of God. Casey, in the language of the land of your birth: Chung toi ban on con ten thanh Cassandra Rachel Nguyen Willkens va xin chua ban phuc cho con.

Marjory:

Cassandra Rachel Nguyen Willkens, we baptize you in the name of the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. As God's love has given you life, may you give life and love to others and they to you.

Peter:

Diane, Rachel and Covey, in affirmation of your covenant

with God and with Casey made publicly today, the waters of Casey's baptism are shared with you. May you give life and love to others and they to you.

All:

Amen.