

Kate Cudlipp: Scripture and the End Times

Scripture and the End Times

Sermon at Seekers Church, November 19, 1995

by Kate Cudlipp

A couple of Christmases ago, I received a card from a friend from college asking me if I still lived in D.C. and was I still searching for the meaning of life. I answered Yes to both.

In college I had left church. This happened after I took a course in the critical study of the Bible that described the formation of the book. Having the Bible an object of academic study where questions about what really happened – and didn't – were permissible freed me up to acknowledge that much of what I had been asked to swallow didn't make sense to me. I didn't believe it and didn't have to. One of the least believable aspects for me was the notion of heaven and hell, the firm assertion of an end time and a Final Judgment that would weigh my life on earth and condemn or save me for eternity. It just didn't ring true

Twenty years later, after dabbling in philosophy and reading evolutionary theory and mostly trying to think about the meaning of life on my own, I realized I was getting nowhere by myself. I began to look for a church and found Seekers, where I felt comfortable enough, after the first Sunday to keep returning. Much later, when I read the Seekers call which describes us as rooted in the Biblical faith, I knew the Bible could be central to the life of a community in a very different way from my early experience, that it could open doors to inquiry into truth, not close them.

Today I want to share my work around our lectionary scriptures about the end times, a small sample of a work in progress that is the ongoing questioning of my place in God's transformation of the world.

Isaiah – written after return of the Israelites from Babylon to Jerusalem. The prophet warns the returned exiles as well as those who never left Judah that physical presence in the Promised Land is not the end of the story. God promises a winnowing, and that only the righteous will see the new creation described in today's scripture.

Thessalonians – Paul was writing sometime after 50 C.E., when the church is having to adapt to the fact that the Second Coming is not imminent; he also warns of false prophets.

Luke – was probably written after 70 C.E. after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans. The descriptions that are attributed to Jesus are consistent both with traditional apocalyptic literature (Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel) and events that happened during the Judeo-Roman conflicts from 66 – 70 C.E.

Let's delve a little further into what was going on in each of the scriptures.

In the chapters leading up to today's Isaiah passage, the prophet tells the Israelites that only those who are capable of seeing a new, divinely fashioned future will participate in it. Many are so invested in the ways things are, they cannot foresee God's future – and they will not be part of it. The passages for today's reading describe God's new creation.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians responds to the belief of some that the Second Coming is imminent; they have stopped all their regular activities, including work because they apparently believed that divine power would intervene in the world and all they had to do was wait. They did not see that they had any responsibility as co-creators in bringing about God's realm.

In Luke Jesus warns the gathering at the temple of the rough road ahead for those who follow him. Family members and friends will betray them, he says; they will be questioned and tortured. Luke was writing at the time that such persecutions and betrayals were taking place in struggling Christian communities; Nero had tried to blame the Christians for the devastating burning of Rome in 64 C.E. The persecutions continued during the chaos that followed Nero's suicide in 68 C.E. Luke gives words of encouragement to Christians by promising that those who persevere in their faith will be saved.

Today's scriptures are about the end times. How real are the end times stories for you? Do they motivate you to live/act as the prophets and Jesus prescribed? Are they troublesome but not really central for you? Do you simply read them and move on?

We are living 2000 years after the most recent apocalyptic statements in the Bible were written – and we're still here. Have these passages lost their credibility for you? Do you expect the end of time to come and to be judged for how you lived on earth?

For me these passages are a wonderful opportunity to wrestle with scripture, neither having to accept the literal meaning of what I read nor dismiss its truth because it comes in sometimes archaic formulations.

God's voice resounds through the millennia, but it must be heard by each generation in language and contexts that have meaning for it.

I see the Bible as a compass that gives us our bearings, keeping us from heading in the wrong direction at any given time, but it is not a road map with every turn marked.

I believe that we, always in the company of the living God, have to map our specific paths in life. We do this by engaging

with scripture – to look for warnings of situations and choices that take us down disastrous paths and for signposts that point us toward fuller life. But it is not scripture only that helps us draw our maps. The living God is also present in the community of fellow seekers – with a small "s" – living and dead, that help us learn where we have to go.

Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of theology at Duke, in his book *Unleashing the Scripture*, says individual North Americans ought to be banned from reading the Bible on their own; that it can only be read and worked with faithfully in the company of other Christians. While I do not agree with everything he says, I hear truth in that central assertion.

Let's go back to our scriptures for today. Isaiah says that to be a participant in the new creation requires being able to envision it and embrace it. This is as a challenge for me. I have a pretty comfortable life. When I think about cataclysmic change, a world turned upside down, I am not necessarily enchanted. I don't know that I can envision the reign of God. Maybe things are supposed to be just the way they are.

Isaiah talks about a radically different world, not tinkering around the edges. How does that feel to you when you really try to get your mind, heart and soul around it? Do you want to try?

Paul writes to the Thessalonians urging them to keep on with their lives while they await the Second Coming. It seems that some Christians at that time were content to wait passively for Christ to transform the current times; they acted as if they had no part in the transformation.

There are many reasons I can find for waiting passively; for hoping that God or others will do whatever is necessary to bring about God's reign. One of the reasons is the feeling of powerlessness; too much is wrong with the world for me to have any influence.

Without having quit your job and become idle, do you, at times feel like the Thessalonians, waiting for God or someone else to accomplish the transformation?

In the Luke gospel, Jesus warns of persecutions and suffering for those who follow him. He promises that those who persevere to the end will gain their souls or, in another translation, win true life. This promise has meaning for me whether or not I expect to see the Human One coming on a cloud as a passage later in Luke describes.

I hear the promise as calling us to be faithful in each moment of our lives, not because we will be punished at some distant judgment but because we cannot come into our fullness at the end – whenever that may be – unless we have been filling up throughout our lives. A moment in which I fail to be an expression of God's new creation is an opportunity lost forever.

Jesus tells his followers – and that means us – that in seeking a comfortable, hassle-free life we choose death rather than life; we choose to lose our souls rather than gain them.

All of these passages challenge us to ask ourselves whether we want to be part of, in Verna Dozier's words, "the dream of God." First, can we envision a world different from the one we live in? Second, do we see ourselves as co-creators of such a world? And third, is our vision strong enough that we can endure the trials and suffering its creation may require? In the words from the gospel, she who endures to the end gains her soul; he who endures to the end shall be saved.