“Apocalyptic Fears and Jubilation”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It’s a lot easier to say than to do, isn’t it? A couple of words have been running through my head this week. One is *mystery*, another is *frustration,* another is *gratitude*. Then, in Bible study the other day, for fun we threw in *eschatology* and *apocalypticism*. I’ll break that down in a little bit . . .

I want to give a little context first for this passage from Paul: Paul, who had been known as Saul, had been known as someone who persecuted the Jews. He was bent on persecution; that was sort of his whole self and being. Then, as he made his way to Damascus, he saw the risen Christ, and his life was utterly changed for the better—changed to the merciful and loving from the critical, the condemning and the persecuting. Our conversations on Thursday were about parables in which Jesus teaches his disciples to live as though they are preparing for the time of the second coming. Sometimes we call that the *apocalypse*, when we will all be judged.; we don’t know when it will be, but we know we will be judged. Then, with a good seminary word for you, *eschatology*, the study, or words about the end times. So, not just for the sake of using big words, we were talking about the end times. That gets into a place of real mystery, because we aren’t there yet. We also, as Jesus reminds us, don’t know when it will be, but, as scripture for the last few weeks reminds us, we will be judged.

This led our conversations the other day in a number of directions, including the one to which Jesus reminds us there is no certain answer: how and when will this happen. Yes, folks, we may anticipate a final judgment, but we don’t know when it will happen. We are also promised God’s loving redemption for people of faith, but we would rather that would happen right now. Carla Works, Professor of New Testament and Dean at Wesley Theological Seminary in D.C., has this to say about this morning’s passage from 1 Corinthians: “Perhaps, in this time of Epiphany, we might affirm both the revelation of the risen Christ and the mystery that awaits us when Christ returns” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). That’s it, isn’t it? We have this epiphany season we have been talking about this for weeks, with epiphany being a revelation and particularly in this season since Christmas, we see people recognizing Jesus for who Jesus is, and also recognizing how we are meant to live in response to that knowledge.

Some of you may not know that Ann is studying lately, taking courses as she discerns whether she may be called to ministry in an ordained capacity. She already serves the church, as does everybody here! We spoke the other day about her course on UCC polity. How do we govern ourselves? How do we make the decisions we make about baptism, about Communion, about who gets to be a member, about who gets to be a leader in the service or the work of the church. But what she’s learning and what I had fun remembering is that our polity does not happen in a vacuum in the United Church of Christ. What is key for us is what we know about God through Jesus Christ is how we make our decision about how we behave with one another and how we govern each other. That’s really *it.* We are a Congregational Church, in which I have no greater voice than you; in which we celebrate everyone’s gifts. We also understand our relationships altogetherthis way and somehow this determines the structure of our churches and our lives. We like to say that we are a denomination of “soft verbs,” which is to say that there are elements of our theology about which we are not going to say, “you must do this; you must believe this.” We listen to what Jesus asks us to do, and then no human person is an intermediary in that way; we do our best to do what Jesus says. This is where, in our conversation this week, Ann said something along the lines of “My gosh, all this stuff about what a bunch of men discussed in the third century, saying ‘you have to believe this or that,’ isn’t what Jesus said. What he did say was “love your neighbor as yourself, the thing that we have to lean on, that love is paramount. While the rest of it is important, in the liturgy of the church, which is to say how we pray, this is not the most important thing. So, we become more open when we choose love first. That is really what we hear in Paul and in the Beatitudes in Luke today. Our polity reflects mystery. When we love one another first, we know that we lean into that love and we don’t judge as readily. If we love first and leave God to judge us, eventually and now, we will listen to one another with love. We will speak to one another in love. Then, when we have choices to make about how we behave, we will lean into mercy.

So, I wonder in this Epiphany period, for which I am especially grateful this year because of light shining in the darkness. Imagine yourself with a spotlight shining on the teachings of Jesus anytime you find yourselves in a little bit of a dark period in these days. Love first. So, if much of our Christian faith is held in the realm of the mysterious, or the “not yet,” what are we to do and to be *right now?* So, in our conversations on Thursday in Bible study we spoke about the end times, knowing that what we do today

 Before going on, it bears our remembering that very few of us grew up in the Congregational Church, UCC. We come from *many* different denominations, with different polity. We are all here, all welcome—including those who were raised atheist, some of whom still are. We find ourselves here, united by Jesus’s message, wondering though how we bridge the gap between all that we have been taught that is different from what we read in scripture, but is about *structure*. Here in this church we are *all* encouraged to be ministers, doing the work of the church. But how do we do that in the here and now, when God in God’s fullness is later? I think we can look at the text of George’s anthem for help in understanding. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but thou can’st not tell from whence it cometh or wither it goeth. So is everyone that is born of the Spirit.” We know from Paul’s words that the present with us.

Jacob Morris is another pastor/theologian that publishes online, (he at aplainaccount.org). He shares the following: “What Paul describes confusingly as the “spiritual body” is not a body that is comprised of spirit. It is, rather, a body that is animated by the Spirit. The mark of a Spirit-filled individual or community is the practice of the self-giving love of God as revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. This is what marks the people of God as not just new creation*s*, but a new creation *community*. Not impressive spiritual gifts, not professional-level worship music or lighting and stage effects, not how much we thank we know about the Bible or theology. The practice of the self-giving love of God as revealed in Jesus is the mark of a participant in the resurrection of the dead” (https://www.aplainaccount.org/post/1-corinthians-15-35-38-42-50).

That makes sense of some of the mystery in a way that I hope will speak to you also. It speaks to our conversations in Bible study the other day and in my conversations with Ann. *We are* a body; we are *the* Body of Christ today, building the realm of God here, today—in challenging times. I hope that you hear Paul’s words in close company with Jesus’ words in today’s lessons. You heard last week the text of what we know as “the beatitudes,” and in case you weren’t online to recall them, I will read again now Luke 6:17-26

**17**He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, **18**who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, **19**and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

**20**Looking at his disciples, he said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
    for yours is the kingdom of God.
**21**Blessed are you who hunger now,
    for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now,
    for you will laugh.
**22**Blessed are you when people hate you,
    when they exclude you and insult you
    and reject your name as evil,
        because of the Son of Man.

**23**“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

**24**“But woe to you who are rich,
    for you have already received your comfort.
**25**Woe to you who are well fed now,
    for you will go hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now,
    for you will mourn and weep.
**26**Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
    for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

To follow these blessings *and woes*, Jesus’ lessons in verses 27 and on are about what love in action looks like and are about resistance; they are not about obeisance to so-called kings of this world. Jesus’ understands that any blessing that comes about from delivering woe to others is temporary, whereas the blessings that come from love are eternal—they are even resurrecting. Jesus’ lessons are about resistance to this world that so often asks us to be weak and so often acts without mercy, out of cruelty and a sense of retributive action rather than restorative justice. I almost feel like leaving those hanging out there, thinking to ask, “have you heard anything about retribution lately?” Have you heard anything about restorative justice? We are called to be the Body of Christ, offering resistance to the demands of empire when empire is without mercy, without love. Jesus understands that any blessing that we can offer now isn’t a ticket to the hereafter, but it helps us to build company, togetherness now. How will we be animated by the Spirit of the living God, how will be animated by Christ himself, so that our living in this world and in this time will model what a life resurrected in God’s kin-dom must be? That is the work we have to do.

I want us to end with the question, what will our living in this world be in order to bring the realm of God here and now. I want to land with that question, because I am confident, we are being shown ways to resist the ways of this world that run counter to God’s will for humanity and for the world itself. Resistance does not look like violence, but does look like coordinated, *inspirited* actions. I will be sharing in our eVisitor on Wednesdays direct actions that may well resemble the sometimes subversive, peaceful methods Jesus himself suggested in his sermon on the plain (or mount). My prayer is that in so acting, in so doing we may know ourselves to be blessed in our mercy and our love, even in an age of public outcries of condemnation, of damnation. May God’s kin-dom come and may God’s will be done on earth, right now, as it is in heaven. Amen.