

Sermon for 5 December 2010
Advent 2, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Several weeks ago TV personality Jon Stewart, sometimes billed as America's most trusted fake news man, held a demonstration in Washington called *The Rally to Restore Sanity*. I saw a bit of his speech at the rally, and the line which probably got the most applause (and certainly the most news coverage afterward) was "we are living in hard times, not *end times*."

There's a degree of wisdom in this sentiment, considering the apocalyptic language that people from both ends of the political spectrum have become comfortable with in recent years. If I might step out on a limb, I think it's more than a little unhelpful to call Barack Obama the anti-Christ or to think of Sarah Palin as the devil in lipstick.

That being said, I wonder if we mostly moderate Christians are a little too quick to dismiss the

apocalyptic themes of scripture, if we're a little too ready to say that we're not living in end times. I know I am. It is for me, I think, mostly a rather self-important attempt to distance myself from those whom I perhaps haughtily think of as "the nuts". You know, they're the Christians who seem overly interested in end-of-the-world prophecies gleaned from a peculiar reading of Revelation and Daniel and some of the other weirder bits of the bible and then apply them to "signs" they've identified in politics and world events.

The problem is that when we simply react against this admittedly odd sort of theology, we can swing too far to the other side, and forget that scripture is full of these apocalyptic themes and if we choose simply to reject them, we're throwing out a lot of what scripture can say to us. We are throwing out the baby of biblical truth with the bathwater of fundamentalist interpretation.

Take this morning's Gospel. We hear a rather disconcerting sermon from John the Baptist who cries "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" and who gives us an image of the final judgment:

His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

There is more to scripture than gentle reminders to be nice to each other. The prophetic tradition in which John the Baptist finds himself is concerned with the eternal consequences of righteousness and wickedness and it is concerned with finality, *the end*, and we are unwise to ignore that message.

Now, before this gets too creepy, it's important to remember that the Kingdom which is to come is a fundamentally positive thing. It is a promised gift to which we may look forward eagerly. This, I think, is where we can draw the most important distinction between the apocalyptic of the Bible and the apocalypticism of some modern

people. You see, the latter, at least as I've heard it preached, is primarily about fear. I beg your pardon for striking out once again against my old punching bag, the History Channel, but if you watch one of those shows they have about Revelation or Nostradamus or 2012 prophecies or whatever it's all about the frightening ways in which either an external force or societal ill will come and kill us all. Nuclear war or an asteroid or swine flu or something will wipe us out, say the commentators on those programs, and we are right to be very afraid.

Sadly it's not just cable television scaring the ratings out of us. There are religious leaders who preach a gospel of fear. Such preaching is perhaps well intended—it's not my place really to speculate—but it is nonetheless a case of misplaced priorities at the very least and in some cases it's profoundly theologically suspect.

The biblical view of the end is radically different from the modern apocalypticism. Instead

of fear the biblical message engenders hope, because it is a story about triumph rather than destruction. There is an element of judgment in the biblical view—John calls for repentance that we might stand up under that judgment—but the overwhelming theme is that of a new peace and prosperity for God's people. Hear again those beautiful words from the Prophet Isaiah:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Every time we come together we pray as our Lord has taught us: *thy kingdom come*. And when we say "thy kingdom come" we pray not for the wrath of God on our enemies but for the peace that lasts to eternity. We pray not for death and destruction,

but for the time when "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

So, to Mr. Stewart's words "we are living in hard times, not end times" I would counter we are indeed living in hard times, but thank God they are end times, too. Thank God that sooner or later our Lord will return in triumph to judge the world, because it means that we who have been given grace to repent of our pride, we who are faithful if even in a little, will be brought at last to that heavenly city of peace and unity to dwell with God forever. We watch, then, not in fear but in eager expectation, knowing that our Lord will come and save his people, captive once to sin, but now made free by the power of his mighty Resurrection.

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