



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida
25 Pentecost - Proper 28 - Year C - November 17/18, 2007
Malachi 3:13 - 4:2a, 4-6; Ps. 98:5-10; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13;
Luke 21:5-19

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

Is it Faith, or Fear?

By your endurance you will gain your souls...

Luke 21:19

Officials coax Russian Doomsday Cult to leave cave, where they await the end of the world! That headline flashed on my computer screen on Friday¹....Of course I couldn't resist checking out the story.

As the Associated Press reported, "Officials were talking with more than two dozen doomsday cult members holed up in a snowy forest near the Volga River to await the end of the world, which their leader says will come in spring."²

According to the AP, "The cult members have threatened to blow themselves up with about 400 liters (100 gallons) of stockpiled gasoline if authorities forced them out of what officials described as a cave or bunker near the village of Nikolskoye, about 400 miles...southeast of Moscow..."³

AP reported that, "Self-declared prophet Pyotr Kuznetsov, who established his True Russian Orthodox Church after he split with the official church, blessed his followers before sending them into the cave earlier this month, but he did not join them himself."⁴ The story stated that, "He was undergoing psychiatric evaluation Friday, a day after he was charged with setting up a religious organization associated with violence. The 29 people [who went in the cave] - including four children, one only 18 months old - had stocked the cave with food and other supplies. Kuznetsov, 43, a trained engineer who comes from a deeply religious family, declared himself a prophet several years ago, left his family and settled in Nikolskoye. He began writing books, borrowing from a mixture of established beliefs, and visited monasteries both in Russia and Belarus, recruiting followers.... Kuznetsov said his group believed that, in the afterlife, they would be judging whether others deserved heaven or hell.... Russian Orthodox Church spokesman Georgy Ryabov said 'All Christians of Russia have to pray for them so they awaken and understand their mistake.'"⁵

That's a good thing to pray for! They *are* mistaken, they need to awaken....*Take heed that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them,* it says in today's Gospel reading from Luke (Luke 21:8) It's too bad that the members of Pyotr Kuznetsov's "True Russian Orthodox Church" didn't read that verse from Luke before they went into the cave!

Oftentimes, that's what people who hold strong apocalyptic views are doing, isn't it? They are going into a cave....They are isolating themselves from the world and its problems and they are hunkering down in a cave, and they are saying to the rest of the world, "to hell with you" and they mean it quite literally! The question is, are people who do this filled with faith? Or are they filled with fear?

To be sure, there is much in our world that is frightening: The snow-balling destabilization of the Middle East; the tenuous situation in Pakistan and continuing struggle in Afghanistan; A deadly cyclone in Bangladesh; A monstrous earthquake in Chile; a serious drought in much of the southeast of the United States; Global warming which can no longer be denied and which poses a real threat to our ecology. From CNN, FOX News, CBS, ABC, NBC and all the rest we are hearing of wars and tumults, of pestilences and famines; nation is lifting up hand against nation and kingdom against kingdom (See Luke 21:10). In many ways, it is understandable that some people see all these as signs from heaven and cry out, "The time is at hand!"(Luke 21:8). It is understandable, but it is also mistaken and also highly problematic...

This kind of thinking *is* driven by fear *and not* by faith. It also fundamentally misconstrues and distorts the meaning and intention of apocalyptic writing in the Bible, the original purpose of which was to provide a message of hope to the faithful, and not to promote fear...It was never intended to be used, as it too often is today, by the likes of Tim LaHaye with his *Left Behind* series and others, to select parts of the Bible and apply them to a series of contemporary world events as though those events were the one's specifically referred to and that the Bible has a secret code one merely needs to figure out....The Bible doesn't have a secret code....That's all nonsense....

The word "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek word "*APOKALUPTO*" which literally means to "reveal," "uncover" or "disclose" hidden things. But it is not a code that is hidden....The hidden things are the things of God. Originally, apocalyptic writing often emerged during crises in the world, either political crises, usually war or persecution, or in the wake of natural disasters - earthquakes or volcanic eruptions and the like. The authors of the apocalyptic writings often claimed to have been granted visions that allowed them to pull back the curtain of heaven and discern the "hidden work" of God in the midst of the world's catastrophes and disasters....While many felt crises represented the absence of God, apocalyptic writers saw God as very present in crises....These disasters were often viewed as God's punishment upon a sinful world....

In the biblical world, as with today, apocalyptic writing was often viewed with a degree of skepticism....There is good reason for this....I personally don't see how we can assert that God is love, which we do indeed assert (See 1 John 4:8, 16), and then attribute to God the kind of violence and wrath that so many apocalypticists do....That is a God of hate and anger, not love and mercy...People who believe in this kind of God often behave hatefully themselves....

Apocalyptic thinking and writing can easily encourage some to understand themselves as a chosen elect and others as despised by God. Think of Fred Phelps and the members of the Westboro Baptist Church who, are very much apocalyptic in their mind set....At the funerals of American service personnel killed in Iraq, they have openly demonstrated carrying neon-colored signs saying things like, "God loves a dead soldier." They believe the death of American military personnel is an expression of God's judgment against the United States because of this country's tolerance of homosexuality. Phelps and his members have demonstrated at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, and other mainline denominations national gatherings, carrying heinous, hate-filled signs about gay and lesbian persons.⁶

This kind of hate speech cannot be reconciled with the most foundational teaching of Jesus, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all

your mind, and love your neighbor as your self” (Matthew 22:37). It certainly cannot be reconciled with Jesus’ teaching, “Judge not that ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1).

Recently, a Maryland court rendered a \$10.9 million judgment decision against Phelps and his church, \$8 million of that in punitive damages for invasion of privacy and emotional damage....Phelps and his church are trying to appeal that decision to the Supreme Court.⁷....It will be interesting to see how that case turns out....Anyway, as I said earlier, apocalyptic thinking and writing can easily encourage some to understand themselves as a chosen elect and others as despised by God....

A too literal view of apocalyptic writing and thinking can also encourage some, even whole civilizations, to avoid responsibility for their own actions and behaviors and to blame God for everything. Recognizing this, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann suggests adopting the term “exterminism” in place of apocalypticism.⁸ He suggests this because he believes that applying the language of apocalyptic to many of the world’s evils today suggests that God is the primary agent morally responsible for these evils...“Would it not be better to call the terrors of the present end-times ‘*exterminism*,’ Moltmann writes, “mass extermination through acts of military, economic or ecological violence?”⁹ He makes his point clear, stating, “Anyone who talks here about ‘the apocalypse,’ or the ‘Battle of Armageddon,’ is providing a religious interpretation for what is a mass *human* crime, and *trying to make God responsible for what human beings are doing*”¹⁰ [emphasis added].

Acknowledging that Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature has emerged from the context of crises, Moltmann suggests a more appropriate way for people of faith to read and hear this literature than simply “hiding in a cave” and waiting for God to bring down wrath on *those other despicable people over there!* He does not believe that apocalyptic writing’s intention was to interpret humanity’s crimes and cosmic catastrophes religiously so that people had license “to collaborate with them, or simply resign themselves to them.”¹¹ “Rather, for Moltmann, apocalyptic writing is intended to awaken the “*resistance of faith*” to the threatening effects of these crimes and catastrophes. Apocalyptic writing is intended to awaken the “*resistance of faith and promote the “patience of hope.”*”¹²

As Moltmann observes, “They spread hope in danger because in the human and cosmic end they proclaim God’s new beginning...In the experiences and forebodings of historical and cosmic terrors, they proclaim God’s future, God’s judgment, and God’s eternal kingdom.”¹³

I think Moltmann is right here....Apocalyptic writing was always to be understood as a word of hope...It was intended to encourage faith *and not* to invite despair....Above all, apocalyptic writing claimed God’s love and activity were present and alive even when the evidence of the world seemed to suggest God was absent or dead...It invited the faithful to be an active part of that divine love and activity, and to do so with some urgency....

At this time in the Church year, as we come to the close of the season after Pentecost, so-called “ordinary time” and anticipate Advent with its dual themes of the second coming of Christ and anticipation of the birth of Christ, the readings for our worship rumble with threat and warning and will do so for the next few weeks....No doubt these writings are intended to remind us of our mortality and to challenge our complacency, for complacency is a tangible indicator of faithlessness.

God does have a hopes and dreams for the world....God does pass judgment on those actions and behaviors of human kind which act to thwart the hopes and dreams of God, including complacency and indifference, and especially complacency and indifference which ignores the plight of the poor, the oppressed and the unjustly marginalized of the world...Scripture repeatedly makes that clear.¹⁴ But Scripture also repeatedly makes clear, God's judgment is tempered by God's mercy.¹⁵

God's hopes and dreams for the world and for his human creation abound in love and God continues to be active in the world to bring this love about...That is the persistent message of the law and the prophets from the time of Moses on down...It is the persistent message of the preaching and teaching of Jesus Christ and his proclamation of the kingdom of God.....

The kingdom of God is a world in which God's hopes and dreams, and above all, God's abundant love are fully realized....It is this realization that we are praying for every time we say in the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The Christian hope is for the kingdom of God - not as some future state of existence, but as a present reality...As people of faith, we are called to be active agents with and in God to help birth this reality....

The apocalyptic messages we will be hearing over the next few weeks articulate the groaning of the whole creation in the travail of this birthing process (See Romans 8:22). They are not, however, intended to resign us all to judgment and destruction....Rather they should encourage us to endure, to persist in faith and hope even when the news of the world, or of our personal lives, sounds hopeless and when it seems to us God is absent.... "*By your endurance you shall gain your souls*" it says in today's Gospel reading Luke...

The Good News of the Christian faith is always a message of God's power and sovereignty to bring life and love out of even the darkest and most desperate situations, whether these are the dark situations of our personal lives or of the political and social order....That is single message of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ...It proclaims God's victory of life and love over the human forces of darkness and death...

As Christians, we need not fear anything, God is light and God is love....While, at times, the forces of darkness and death may seem to have the upper hand, God's will and God's ways will prevail....

The days are shorter and darker now....To be sure, the world shakes with trembling and fear in so many ways and in so many places, and perhaps you are afraid too....God's word to you today is "Fear not!" Light is coming again, light will always come again, because God's love for his creation is persistent.....God's love for us is persistent.....

Have faith....Endure...Be filled with hope...Promote peace... Strive for justice.. Above all, do love....always do love...And know this: Christ is coming once again....He is coming soon....The kingdom of God is, indeed, at hand....

1. "Officials coax Russian doomsday cult to leave cave where they await the end of the world" See http://news.aol.com/story/_a/officials-coax-russian-doomsday-cult-n20071116190509990021

2. "Officials coax Russian doomsday cult..."

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3. "Officials coax Russian doomsday cult..."
 4. "Officials coax Russian doomsday cult..."
 5. "Officials coax Russian doomsday cult..."
 6. See "Church ordered to pay \$10.9 million for funeral protest" at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/10/31/funeral.protest/index.html?iref=newssearch>
 7. "Church ordered to pay \$10.9 million for funeral protest"
 8. Moltmann, Jürgen *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 202
 9. Moltmann, p. 203
 10. Moltmann, p. 203
 11. Moltmann, p. 203
 12. Moltmann, p. 203
 13. Moltmann, p. 203
 14. See Isaiah 1:14-17; Amos 2:6-7; Matthew 19:16-24; 25:31-46; Mark 10:17-25; Luke 14:12-24;
 15. See Psalms 25:6; 51:2; 69:16; 119:56; Isaiah 30:18; 55:7; 63:7; Jeremiah 31:20; Ephesians 2:4