



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

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Uncovering the Apocalypse

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 26, 2017
The Last Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 25:31-46*

Apocalypse. What do you think of when I say that word? Apocalypse. Could it be some of the most vivid imagery in our scriptures? Fire raining down from heaven? Four horsemen under a blood moon? Or perhaps you recall some of the most vivid imagery from our screens? A virus' relentless outbreak with scientists in hazmat suits scrambling for a cure? A zombie horde in Atlanta stumbling after the remaining survivors. The Big One in the City of Angels? A bald Marlon Brando in the shadows of a jungle?

Or perhaps, more vivid than any scripture reading or movie, the thought of apocalypse summons fearsome specters from our history. Ones that are all too real: those mushroom clouds, for example, that haunt us with their blinding light. And, as it has been for decades, with the push of blood-red buttons in the offices of head-strong heads of state, we could readily usher in our own apocalypse, without God's help.

But what if I told you that the word Apocalypse doesn't strictly mean a cataclysmic end? That this is a sort of mistranslation? That apocalypse is a different kind of ending, more like the end of an Agatha Christie mystery, with the detective Hercule Poirot revealing, with glinty eyes, that the butler did it?

Or like when Scooby-Doo and the gang pull the mask off the ghost to reveal that it was just Old Man Sotheby trying to manipulate the spooky house's sale price. Pulling off a mask, actually, is the best comparison yet, because the word apocalypse, in the Greek, means an *uncovering*.

An apocalypse is truly an apocalypse when something hidden is revealed. Like the culprit at the end of a mystery, or the bride revealed under her veil, or the reading of test results to a patient. These kinds of revelations are less likely to be end of **the** world, but they do serve as an end of **a** world, a break with the past world. After an apocalypse, the old life is definitively over, and the new life has begun, and there's no going back, because the truth is hidden no more.

The most recent mini-apocalypse that comes to mind is all of the recent uncoverings of the abuse and coercion by certain men in the worlds of media and politics. All of this dismay and tumult and regret come from a revelation. Something in our society has been uncovered so that we are now beginning to hear the voices of the victims of people who are (or were) beloved to us, these secular idols and heroes. Before the mini-apocalypse, if the survivors told the truth they would be sidelined and destroyed. Now, after the apocalypse, there is increasing room in our common life to hear what was hidden, this awful truth: that people that we respected as our leaders have twisted the full weight of their power to abuse those who wouldn't be believed, until now. And in every successive revelation, we witness the disruptive end of a world, the end of a career or an organization. But in this we also witness the beginning of a new time, beginning to learn how to live a life in the scouring light of the truth, because there's no going back.

Now don't let me suggest that this work is finished. All institutions, including much of our corporate life and service industries and the churches, have to face the consequences of the hidden things being made known.

Tragically, our church, and others like it, have learned, over the past decades, how to do this. We are still learning, with a bit of a head start, compared to other trusted institutions. We've had our apocalypses, and we continue to learn what it means to be accountable and then to preventatively protect all our members in the full, scouring light of what can go wrong.

But all of us would do well to learn what it means to listen to the survivors of abuse in our institutions, and how to check the power of any person to abuse with impunity within them. Whether you serve as a volunteer, a part-timer, or as a member of the board, we must find a way to mold our institutions so we can bear to hear the cry of the ill-treated, so we can hear the voice of Christ in them before it is too late, before the apocalypse comes, before all is revealed, and we discover whose side we were on, and are left to dwell on our complicity with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We should enter into this work, not with dread, but with faith and trust. Trust in God's supreme interest: salvation in the midst of revelation. God has no desire to send anyone to the trash heap. God's mission in us is always a salvage operation, a restoration project.

Jesus saves, yes, and Jesus also recycles!

And the best chance for the most productive salvage operation is to help us to know what's what sooner rather than later, to show us the apocalypse before the apocalypse comes.

All the stories of apocalypse in our faith are not there to scare us and sell popcorn at epic movies. They are there to teach us. These stories are lively parts of a speculative, preventative spirituality, where we can, oddly enough, learn from our mistakes in the future just as well as our mistakes in the past.

I'm reminded of Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge, who met three spirits who revealed the consequences of his miserly life. The third spirit was the most fearsome, yet the most edifying: the silent figure of Christmas Yet to Come. Before the spirit can show him the possible upshot of his life, Ebenezer can feel what is coming:

'Ghost of the Future.' Ebenezer exclaimed, 'I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me.'

It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight before them (to the Future).

'Lead on,' said Scrooge. 'Lead on. The night is waning fast, and it is precious time to me, I know. Lead on, Spirit.'

Like the parable by Dickens, the parable that Jesus tells us today is nothing less than the coming of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, yet for all of us. It is an apocalyptic parable where the truth of life is uncovered to the surprise of all.

You can hear the astonishment of those gathered before the King of Judgment at the end of their lives. They are not judged by their religion or nation or any kind of identity. Radically, they are judged by what they did. Specifically, whether or not they served God in their midst.

"'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty, or without clothes, sick, or abused, or in prison?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you helped one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

This is the mind-blowing apocalypse. This is the uncovering. God was in front of them the whole time! And they missed out! And the question turns to the listener: "Now that we know the truth, now that we know where God is, will we miss out? Will you?"

Jesus and Charles Dickens tell us these tales of spiritual imagination, not primarily to scare us, but so that we might learn from the future before it can happen, so that we might learn from the truth before it is obvious to everyone, but then too late. For if we, in our spiritual imagination and prayers, if we can experience the apocalypse **before** the apocalypse, then we have a shot at less anguish and less ruin when all is uncovered. We might have a shot at being so much less surprised when God's fullness is uncovered and discovered not only in heaven, but in every person we will ever meet.

The scouring truth is at once glorious and disturbing: In loving our neighbor, God is loved. In neglecting our neighbor, God is neglected.

As we stand at the end of another Christian calendar year, at the end of the season of Pentecost, may we all find the resolve to be more apocalyptic. May we resolve to learn from our end before it comes, to listen to the voice of Christ in our suffering neighbors, and to shape our institutions to be able to listen to these voices, too, before it is too obvious and too late.

May we strain to see what has yet to be uncovered in all the apocalypses of our lives, so that what will have been a collapse will instead become a salvage operation, a restoration project.

While we still have breath, may we join with Mr. Scrooge in praying: *"Lead on. The night is waning fast, and it is precious time to me, I know. Lead on, Spirit."*