
Fireworks and Hope at the Gate of the Year

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 29, Year B

I am not a huge fan of New Year's Eve. The pressure to stay up until midnight shoveling still more food and drink into my impossibly bloated holiday body barely held in place by my most punishing pair of Spanx; the sneaking suspicion that everyone else is having a blast and that I should be, too, even though I'd much rather be curled up on the sofa in my ratty old bathrobe watching the 15th—and this time, surely, final—Downton Abbey movie . . .

Then, of course, there are the fireworks. You've heard of Louisiana, the Pelican State. Well, I'm from Mississippi, the Pyrotechnic State. Where I grew up, setting off fireworks is a way of life. People use them not just to mark New Year's Eve but virtually every other occasion, too, from the holidays to the hellish days, from getting married to getting your braces removed, from the 4th of July to the fourth anniversary of your fourth cousin passing the bar exam.

Despite all this, I have an ambivalent relationship with explosive devices. You see, when I was a teenager, a physics professor at the university in my hometown accidentally turned an entire case of those black snake fireworks—you know the ones that race all around making sizzling noises and puffing smoke—this physics professor accidentally pointed the black snake fireworks in the wrong direction so that the lovely party we'd all been enjoying suddenly erupted into panic and chaos as people ran for the hills. It looked like we'd been transported to ancient Egypt and were members of Pharaoh's court fleeing one of the plagues. But I digress.

Today, in the life of the Church, it is New Year's Eve. This is the Last Sunday after Pentecost, the last Sunday of the old liturgical year. Next week we begin a new year with the First Sunday of Advent. As with any respectable New Year's Eve observance, we have some fireworks today—fireworks in the form of our scripture readings. Actually, we've been having these for a few weeks now: "Nation will rise against nation," we heard last Sunday, "and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

This morning's second lesson comes from the Revelation to John, a book where, among other things, you can read about the four horsemen of the apocalypse, the moon becoming like blood, a mountain burning and collapsing into the ocean, and, of course, a beast with seven heads and ten horns. We're only on chapter one today, so the language is much tamer, but you can still get a sense of what's ahead: "Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail."

On his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. Apocalyptic literature—that is, literature that focuses on the end times and often also on Christ's return to earth in power and great glory—apocalyptic literature like this tends to get a bad rap. It can be fiery, shooting off in directions you wouldn't expect and making people, quite literally, want to run for the hills. Some Christians use apocalyptic themes to announce their piety to the world, or, at least to those who drive past them on the freeway ("In case of Rapture, this vehicle will be unmanned," one popular bumper sticker puts it). Others employ them in an apparent attempt to frighten non-believers into conversion, as when those giant billboards ask, "If the Apocalypse happened now, would you be left behind?" No wonder so many of us tend to brush off this type of literature as embarrassingly antiquated and irrelevant.

This is unfortunate, as the Book of Revelation is actually quite well suited to our time. Not because it refers to cosmic catastrophes and suggests that things like wars and earthquakes and rising sea levels mean that the end times are near. Not because of this, but because Revelation was written for a people who, like us, lived in a period of great tumult, a period in which it was easy to give into despair, a period in which it often seemed best simply to capitulate to the current circumstances, never daring to dream of any other possibilities.

The Revelation to John was composed for early Christians in and around Asia Minor who were experiencing persecution at the hands of an oppressive imperial regime. Its writings were designed to bring comfort and hope to a people who had all but given up and who supposed that the forces of death and domination were going to have the final say. It's easy to forget this primary focus because of all the "fireworks" that surround it—it's easy to get caught up in all the strange and violent symbolism that we can't possibly make sense of. But if you look closely, it's there: Hope is there. Reassurance is there. For instance, the beloved text we often hear on All Saints' Day: "See the home of God is among mortals . . . and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. . . See I am making all things new." This beloved text is from the Book of Revelation.

In this morning's reading, Jesus reassures a broken people: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," the beginning and the end. *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.* In other words, listen up, folks! All y'all who are alternately despondent and hysterical because Caesar keeps trying to present himself as the ultimate source of authority in life, the one with whom your fate is gonna rise and fall—all y'all who keep buying into this propaganda, wait just a minute. Not so fast. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," Jesus says. I, not Caesar. Your times are in my hand. And in that time that is beyond all time, when, as the prophet Isaiah foretold, "sorrow and sighing will flee away"—in that time beyond all time, when I return in triumph and great glory, I will make all things new, I will set all things right. Even the things you were sure were broken forever. As the writer Tish Harrison Warren observes:

This—[this commitment God makes here]—this is God's definitive response to the longing of the human soul. It is our hope that truth, beauty, and goodness will last, and that evil, sorrow, and death will not. It is the promise that we and all of the cosmos are not doomed to fate and left on our own, but that we will be made whole and new.^[1]

Which strikes me as pretty Good News as we stand on the cusp of this new year, a new year for the Church and, soon, a new year for our world. A world that has many of us on edge. All around us there are signs of doom and gloom, hints of collapse and of the end of so many things we hold dear. We seem hopelessly divided as a country. Our perpetual rage at one another expresses itself not only in elections, but in traffic jams, at work, in the check-out line at the grocery store, during parent-teacher conferences, and, yes, of course, at the Thanksgiving dinner table. Rates of anxiety and depression are through the roof, especially among the young. The poor are getting poorer by the day. The building boom that has been lucrative for some has forced many from the neighborhoods where their families have lived for generations and rendered others homeless. And on top of all this, people we love are sick. They are sick, and they are dying, and we can't stop it.

And yet . . . and yet . . . none of these things are the final words about our lives. None of these realities, no matter how painful and foreboding, will have the last say about human existence. Because in that time described by the Book of Revelation, that time beyond all time—in that time, cancer and depression and children playing alone at recess and seniors going to bed hungry will be no more. Worries about a friend's immigration status will be no more. White supremacy and racism will be no more. Famines and global pandemics will be no more. Drug addiction and accidental overdose will be no more. Death will be undone. Tears will be wiped away, once and for all. This is the very essence of our Christian hope, and it is a hope that will never, ever, disappoint us.

Which gives us a choice about how we live right now. No matter what heavy burdens we may carry, no matter what fears and doubts and anguish may be ours, we can live in the assurance that "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." And his kingdom will have no end! Even now, it is breaking in through all our confusion and sadness with what the Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent calls Christ's "daily visitation," those moments in which, against all odds, we get a foretaste of the joy and peace that he has brought, is bringing, and will bring.

In 1939, King George VI, the man who never wanted to be king and who struggled through every speech he ever made, had the unenviable task of trying to lift the British people's spirits during his annual Christmas radio address. Acknowledging the terrifying uncertainty that had gripped the nation since it went to war with Germany

some three months earlier, he quoted a poem by a sociologist at the London School of Economics:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown. And he replied: Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be better to you than life and safer than a known way.^[2]

May the same hope be ours on the cusp of this new year. Amen.

^[1] Warren, Tish Harrison. *Advent: The Season of Hope*. IVP, 2023.

^[2] Haskins, Minnie Louise. "The Gate of the Year," originally published as "God Knows."

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