

Everyday Apocalypse
Grace Episcopal Church
November 17, 2019 | Rick Elgandy

Good morning. I'm Rick Elgandy, and I chair the Stewardship Committee. Today marks the "official" end of our stewardship campaign, though we'll continue to cheerfully accept pledges for 2020 as they might become available. And without intending to do so, we've scheduled that end on a perfect day to talk, with the lectionary's help, about other kinds of endings.

I discovered the faith that claimed me at about the age of 18, as a result of what you might call philosophical argumentation. I suspect that many of you had some form of religious instruction growing up: perhaps some observance in your household of "Bible Sunday," or at least a reasonable familiarity with the basic tenets of Christianity. I mostly did not: at an age that I will withhold but by which time I certainly ought to have known better, I argued to my friends that the Bible could not be "true" because it was written by King James in the 16th century. (I like to joke that I did a Ph.D. in theology to atone for this error, so I can now tell you that the very smallest problem with that sentiment is that the King James Version dates back to the 17th century.)

To make matters even more perplexing, as I turned to scripture myself for the first time, the only book I could bring myself to read for an entire year was Revelation. This surely had something to do with the fact that the version of Christianity into whose hands I had been delivered was marked by the anxiety about the world and the urgent demand for vindication that characterizes apocalyptic literature, and the forms given to those impulses by, for instance, the famous *Left Behind* series. This made me a very strange person for a while, if you'll indulge me in the hope that this phase has mostly passed (though the subjects of my writing strongly suggest otherwise!). After now 18 years of studying theology and its many adjacent disciplines (and, I promise, reading the less cinematic parts of the Bible), I am only marginally less perplexed.

As you've noticed, my story – like any story – involves an approach to time: a medium of change, the thread with which any story is woven. And that is itself a matter of some perplexity: Augustine famously writes, "If no one asks me [what time is], I know; if I want to explain it to someone who does ask me, I do not know," and this seems to have been confirmed, in my limited understanding, by those pioneers in physics and neurobiology who have found time to be one of the more elusive qualities of our experience, to say the least. As a result, it feels treacherous to attempt to preach on stewardship in relation to time.

But I think we all sense some vitally important things about how we experience time in our corner of the world. I bet you feel, as I do, that it's very challenging today to be the subject of one's own time, rather than constantly embattled by it – to wield time, rather than to be alienated from it. So much of our economy is structured on debt, which is a force that commodifies the future in service of present and past, locking us into a practice of regimented time: next month's payment, and the next month's, seem to require that our present work continue, whether or not there is life in it. And so on until our end: "mortgage," for instance, literally means "dead pledge," a guarantee of payment with all the time one has, if necessary. Meanwhile, those things

that make us feel most like ourselves, that remind us who we are and what we are called to do in the world, fight for our scarce resources of time. We know in our bones that time is measured in dollars and cents just as much as in hours and minutes.

Control over time – or time’s control over oneself – is also a fair measure of power. A few years ago, one French social theorist named this set of phenomena “dromocracy”: the rule of speed. The powerful control more time, more convenience, quicker travel; those who can produce or move more quickly become more powerful themselves, allowing them to purchase the labor time of others. Access to “high-occupancy toll” lanes on I-66 and I-95 that promise to return some home from work more quickly can be had for a price. High frequency traders have been known to move their computers as close as possible to stock exchanges, sometimes building new cable networks across states to shave nanoseconds off the time it takes to execute an order. Efficiency, maximum output for minimum time, is a mark of professionalism, skill, worthiness for positions of prestige and authority. Those who can prove themselves time’s masters are rewarded, celebrated, admired, and often empowered with even more agency over time.

In relation to this, love is slow.

Theologians have long distinguished between two Greek words for time: “chronos,” something like ordinary or measurable time (the clock, the calendar, the amortization table), and “Kairos,” something like the fullness of time, the decisive time, illuminated time. “Chronos” is our experience of the everyday, the time that we can attempt to turn into one of our commodities, though we may well find that it has captured us in the attempt. “Kairos” is time characterized by presence; time that mediates the life to which it has become transparent; time that reveals.

The two longer selections from the lectionary this morning – Isaiah 65 and Luke 21 – are illustrations of *kairoi*, or to invoke another Greek word (one that would make my young adult heart leap with excitement) “apocalypsis,” apocalypse, or unveiling, or “revelation.” “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth,” says God to Isaiah, “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” The fullness of life is promised – we are enjoined to “rejoice forever” because “the one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth” – and that fullness includes a reconciling peace and the establishment of justice. Those in the beloved community will not labor in vain: “they shall not build and another inhabit,” but rather expend their time, energy, and attention toward those projects that sustain their own lives. Apocalyptic literature seeks to “unveil” that which is beneath or encoded into history; Isaiah’s vision shows that the power of love is at work everywhere making things new, righting the deep distortions of our social world, and calling us to abundant life. It is time fulfilled, time transfigured by love.

Luke’s account of revelatory vision is a bit more bracing. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem followed by wars, earthquakes, and famines. Persecution, divided loyalties, even betrayal. And amidst all this, a call for patience: “the end will not come immediately.” What is revealed here is the profound disorder and violence of the world, a sense of threatening instability and chaos. We might say that the powers of the world – religions, governments, economies – left to their own devices and unchecked by the interruptions of the mystery of love, tread inevitably toward upheaval. What is revealed here is that such structures of the world, those we would “adorn with beautiful stones and gifts to God,” are forms that are passing away;

that amidst that passing away, they will fight for more time; that in that fight, they will grasp for more and more control, an endless centripetal force to attempt to establish themselves – Rome, “eternal city,” making a desolation and calling it peace, which was the target most of our “apocalyptic” literature had in mind in its own context.

Rome was not the eternal city: it was too fast. It built roads to move armies in less time, and the eternal city cannot be built by arms; it devolved into dictatorship, the ultimate form of impatience (and that draught which we imbibe every time we attempt to control life by force, whatever the scope of our own power). In comparison to this, love is slow. Love is patient. The eternal city (you know I have to cite the Book of Revelation now) is the city with no temple aside from the presence of Love Itself. The eternal city is here now: it haunts us through those saints who bear an impatience for injustice but a loving kindness for even their enemies. The eternal city is around the corner where there is a true, creative peace. The eternal city breathes through the silences and outcries of our hope. The eternal city is coming, but not on a timeline we can dictate: that attempt will assure that we use its name to build a Babel.

The eternal city is alive in the possibility of an everyday apocalypse – an unveiling in our actual, material lives of the power that truly directs our time because it boils within our furthest reaches: “the love that moves the sun and other stars.” The heartbeat of that love, and not the ticking of the clock, is the metronome of our lives. It is a love militant, engaged in protest against that which would flatten our time together, that which would break its capacity to hold presence and life, that which would reap our time, condemning us to plant so that only others may eat. And to encourage a life lived in light of that love, open to the fullness of time, Jesus ends this passage with an unusual promise: “By your endurance you will gain your souls.” Endurance, by definition, is very slow indeed, however long it takes. But it’s the all-too-necessary virtue that insists on faithfulness to what gives life, and in so doing, claims a soul.

Grace Church has been a site of that endurance for many of you – not primarily because you are subjected to the stewardship chair’s ramblings (though there is that), but because you have chosen faithfulness to this place, and likely chosen it again and again. You have come to share time with our community, bringing an open mind and heart, probably even when that was difficult to muster. And many of you have committed yourselves to Grace’s future by pledging some of the money earned by your own labor next year. In doing so, I think you resist some of the forces of desperately speedy accumulation, and invest instead in a different kind of order.

When I was young and wanted the end of the world, I had entirely missed the point. The “end” of the world is not just its final chapter; it is the world’s purpose. It is not wanton destruction, a convenient cover for revenge fantasies and cultural resentment that emerge from anxiety: it is making all things new. It is not vindication of those who identify as “Christians”: it is the fruit of endurance, fruit claimed now, little by little, when we reserve amidst the demands of our lives some time that is open to fullness, to otherness, to transformation. The apocalypse is a revelation of that which is present to time as its great center of gravity, that which magnetizes time toward our flourishing, that which has been at work from the foundations of the world to, in its own time, show itself as an order of love.

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