

Now, Not Just Later

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Revelation 7:9-17

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I used to think that the Millerites were sad and a bit distorted lot; practicing a wild and warped version of Christianity based on our passage from Revelation. In case you are unfamiliar with the Millerites, they were followers of the Baptist minister William Miller who pondered the book of Daniel and Revelation and Christian apocalyptic literature and believed he could calculate the days when 'all the affairs of our present state would be wound up' and Christ would return. In 1839, like all good religious leaders do, he hired a promoter, and began preaching and speaking at religious revivals and camp meetings all over the country warning and predicting of Christ's imminent return which was to occur by his calculation in March of 1843. March came and went and Miller realized he had miscalculated by a year and then March 1844 came and went and another re-calculation was done and finally October 22, 1844 was the 'last definite date' set by Miller for the Lord's coming. October 22nd came and went as well and the mass movement and mass hysteria about the return of Christ collapsed, according to historian Sydney Ahlstrom, amidst general feelings of betrayal, profiteering, and resentment among other revivalist churches and Baptists and Methodists from which the millennialists and Millerites had come.¹ This episode has come to be known as the 'Great Disappointment,' as the masses gathered in a field in October 1844 waiting for the return of Christ, which never came to fruition, at least not as calculated or predicted.

Again, I used to think the Millerites were to be pitied and maybe even ridiculed for their stubborn insistence on the 'end times' or the 'return of the Lord' by a certain date only to be made foolish and embarrassing, especially as such a return never came about. But I wonder if there are worse things than foolishly chasing after the return of Christ and having disillusionments and misplaced hopes and expectations shattered in the events of the 'Great Disappointment.' The saying goes that 'tis better to love and lost than to never love at all, and I wonder if it is also better to hope and to be disappointed, than to never hope at all. The Millerites were a bit too zealous and misplaced with their expectations of Christ's return, but it was a future reality that they believed was real and forthcoming, not imaginary and nonexistent or something to be indifferent about. A dream deferred may fester or even explode as poet Langston Hughes suggests, but

¹ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 480.

maybe even worse is a dream that cannot captivate us at all or a life without dreams at all or hope or sacrifice for the future.

The book of Revelation, from which our passage today, comes, is a piece of apocalyptic literature. We Presbyterians, as you can imagine, have not been gifted in handling apocalyptic literature very well. You might say in general we have an allergic reaction to it. In fact, our forebear, John Calvin, no less, refused to write a commentary at all on Revelation. It was just too many tempestuous images and wild beasts; too many colorful visions and uncontrollable predictions. So he just took a pass, trusting in a more austere deity who would bring things to their proper fulfillment decently and in good order. What Revelation shows us, is that the inbreaking of God and God's beloved community, the passing away of the old order and the inbreaking of the new order, come about a bit more turbulently than our decent and orderly Presbyterian hearts can bear. And Revelation is John's vision of the fulfillment of the reign of Christ, the vision of Christ's beloved community taking full form with us, the establishment of Christ's kingdom as it overcomes, dissolves, and displaces the divisions of the old order of Roman rule and subjugation, the old order of cultural divide between Greek and Jew, the gender divide between male and female, the caste divide between slave and free, and we can add or own modern versions of the old order that Revelation's new order breaks down, the divide between immigrant vs. citizen, Republican vs. Democrat, black lives matter vs. all lives matter, vaxers vs. anti-vaxers, and yet the hope of Revelation is not that we are going to be part of an unending conflict between all these forces and voices and angry fragmentations of ourselves, but that Christ's triumph has created a new age of fulfillment that will bring about reconciliation, healing, and shalom in this old order, and yet will ultimately break the old order down and does away with it, bringing in its place reconciliation, unity, and justice. There is a Taizé chant that sings, 'the kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit,' and that is the vision of Revelation even in the turbulence and cosmic battles that confronted the early church and that continue to rage in our world and in our lives and threaten to unravel us and render us into deeper and further fragmentations of ourselves. It is this vision of the beloved community where enemies are reconciled, where the marginalized are welcomed, where tears are wiped away and room is found for all, and each member knows their God given purpose in their lives and are set free to flourish and to forget themselves long enough to join together in making a joyful noise before God. That is the vision that Revelation gives us glimpses of and teaches us to hope for.

The native of Mississippi, civil rights leader, and religious iconoclast Will Campbell reminds us that Paul's letter to the Corinthians says, 'we implore you, *katallegate*, be reconciled to God.... he did not say try and become reconciled but rather 'be reconciled' — 'be what you already are,' we have already been reconciled through Christ...'it is over, it

is already done.’ Campbell continues: the church is made of up those who accept this enlistment, this reality, ‘therefore, if I am reconciled there is no such thing as black, redneck,’ fill-in your racial or tribal epithet, for in the New Testament vision of heaven here and now, ‘all those world standards, all human categories we place one another in’ have been done away with and ‘we just live by what has already been done for us.’² The kingdom of heaven and the beloved community are those moments, those divine interventions, and those serendipitous occasions when the stark divisions and divides of our world and the old order are dispelled by the new order of Christ’s beloved community and we get a glimpse of what heaven will be like and what direction the future is headed and how Christ’s fulfillment of all things will shape our lives, not just in the sweet by and by, but here and now, in this life, in our lives, in this world.

The vision of the beloved community that Revelation shows us is a vast multitude of people from every people, nation, and tribe as far as the east is from the west, and in spite of a lack of worldly power, the lack of a resume they can point to in order to justify their existence, in spite of whether or not they feel like they have anything to show for themselves and their lives, they make a joyful noise before God and sing praises before the Lord. Christianity has evolved from a rural religion of the ancient near East to a fringe religion of Roman cities to medieval chants and cloisters to the choral evensong of Westminster Abbey to the camp meetings of the American frontier to the ring shout and back house gatherings of enslaved African Americans to the digitalized livestream of the 21st century post-pandemic worship service, but through it all, through whatever else is happening in the world, whatever the most frightening representations of evil may be threatening, Eugene Peterson reminds us all that has ‘always [been] set alongside the extravagant praise Christians sing.’ Peterson continues: ‘Nowhere in the Bible is there any attempt to answer the question, ‘Why does a good God permit evil?’ Evil is a fact and the Bible spends a good deal of space insisting that certain things are evil, but the Bible does not provide an explanation of evil—rather, it defines a context: all evil takes place in an historical arena bounded by Christ and prayer. Evil is not explained but surrounded.’³ Evil is not explained but surrounded by the inbreaking of the new order. Surrounded by a beloved community that lives in the world with unsinkable hope.

One of my many ministry fails was a sermon many years ago when I took it upon myself to deconstruct the hymn and bluegrass anthem ‘I’ll fly away.’ I thought it was ironic that such a lovely and melodious tune had such sad lyrics that only longed to fly away from this life and this world and on to another celestial shore. After I made all my

² Will Campbell, *Conversations with Will Campbell*, ed. Tom Royals, 14.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination*, 85.

points persuasively, in my view, a church member shared with me that when her husband was dying of cancer that song was the only thing in the midst of pain and suffering that gave him some relief and comfort. And so sometimes the songs we sing in beloved community can penetrate deeper and wider than our most gifted theological analysis. But Revelation is not a vision of a heaven far away in a realm separate from and beyond this world. Revelation is the vision of heaven fully overtaking this world, fully dissolving the old order, and fully surrounding evil and all its destruction with the persistent and dependable and hopeful presence of Christ. It is the inbreaking of heaven, the inbreaking of Christ's kingdom, the inbreaking of the beloved community into this realm, where we are made to see what reality really looks like, where we are able to see true Christian community, and where we are able to kindle hope even in a world happy to inoculate itself with numbness and indifference. Another hymn in our hymnal, 773, 'Heaven Shall Not Wait,' reminds us that 'heaven will not wait for triumphant hallelujahs only when earth has passed and we reach another shore,' but that 'Jesus is Lord in our present imperfection, and his power and love are for now,' using us to establish embassies of his love and outposts of his beloved community in this life and in this world, as we are guided by a vision of the life that is to come. Amen.