

“Beginner’s Mind”

January 21, 2024

*Based on 1 Corinthians 7:29-31. Paul Prepares for the End of the World*

One of the most beloved prayers in the recovery community, that is not often known beyond that community, is termed *The Set Aside Prayer*.

*God, the Set Aside Prayer, says, help me to set aside everything I think I know about addiction, about recovery, about myself, and even about you, God, so that I might have a new experience with all of these things.*

And then the prayer concludes, *Please help me to see the truth.*

*Seeing the truth* is much on the mind of the Apostle Paul, as he pens this part of his first letter to the Corinthians. Set aside everything you think you know about the world as it is, Paul is saying, so that you can see the truth of the world as it is becoming, in keeping with the reign of God.

Time, itself, Paul writes, is going through a change. The world as we have known it is ending, he says. A new world, which is actually the *real* world, which is actually the world as our Creator intended it to be all along, Paul says, is about to come.

And *you* can be part of that becoming!

It turns out today’s Lesson is a classic example of what big name highly educated academic theologians call *apocalyptic eschatology*. Which is a fancy way of saying that the human world as we have constructed it - which *works*, in theory, for those with access to particular forms of power and privilege, including many of us here at SPC - is in fact falling apart at the seams, and has been all along built on a house of cards, with its social turmoil and its corrupt governments, with its pandemics and its wars, with its natural disasters and its environmental collapse.

Once we see that truth, apocalyptic eschatology says - that the world as we have constructed it emphatically does *not* work for those without access to power and privilege, or for the planet itself - we have a choice to make. We can respond in fear, fighting like the dickens to keep the status quo that used to work for us - somewhat - intact. Or we can respond in faith and see a deeper truth of a more just and sustainable future in keeping with the reign of God. And then live as if *that* future were already here.

Communities on the margins and actively oppressed communities have embraced this spiritual practice of *living as if* a more just and sustainable future were already here for millennia. The old spiritual, for example, that insists *before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave*, leading African Americans to live *as if* freedom has already been won, even when slavery still scandalously exists.

The rituals of the LGBTQIA+ community, for example, who found a way to sacramentalize their unions, leading the community to *live as if* marriage equality was the law of the land long before the courts and the churches caught up with the truth of their lifelong commitments to one another.

The late 19th Century Ghost Dance of Native America, for example, calling forth the spirits of the dead to help them end colonial expansion and enact an age of peace and prosperity, even as the worst practices of forced assimilation seemingly claimed themselves victorious.

In fact, as Episcopal Bishop and Choctaw Elder Steven Charleston reminds us, *Native American culture in North America has been through the collapse of civilization and lived to tell the tale*. We who are White often think that these parts of Native American culture were squelched. In truth, according to Bishop Charleston, they went underground, and are now re-emerging in powerful ways to meet the apocalyptic anxiety of our present age.

We, who fear the collapse of our culture now in the 21st century, or who simply hurt from the more personal apocalyptic endings in our own lives - due to illness or loss of a job or a relationship or injustice or just plain realizing the world we thought worked for us really never did - we can learn from their strategies for survival, their resilience, and their ultimate vision of hope.

Those strategies include an embrace of radical inter-dependence; building bridges across communities of difference to find common ground; listening to what the earth is saying as *a being in relationship* rather than a resource for consumption; recovering a sense of sacred purpose; and reclaiming a view from eternity.

This is not unlike what the Apostle Paul encourages of the Corinthians: reorganize your priorities toward the reign of God and away from the values of a culture that is crumbling around you; reframe your perceptions of what is real and lasting and what seems to be real but has no true substance; prepare for the challenges to come by envisioning the reign of God and then living as if it were already here. As Bishop Charleston puts it, *you* can be an axis point of the apocalypse.

One quick caveat: it may sound a bit like spiritual escapism to view the economic and political and environmental crises in our world today as somehow being a good thing, that they signify an age that is passing away in order for the pending reign of God to usher itself in. But neither Bishop Charleston nor the Apostle Paul nor yours truly is encouraging us to hide in our spiritual bunkers as the end of the world unfolds.

Instead they are calling us to prophetic hope. To reclaim the deeper truth of the reign of God in our midst, and to be part of its becoming, so that in the words of the Set Aside Prayer, we can wipe the slate clean, prepare ourselves for something completely new, come together as a community in radical humility, and embrace the mind of the beginner.