

**THE VISION OF JESUS**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has a vision. It's a vision for which many are willing to die, as was Jesus for his. I'll get back to that but first let's take a look at the lessons for today.

The first lesson (Genesis 9:8-17) is a mythic folktale from the Great Ancestors—the ancestors of Jews, Christians and Muslims. It's the story of Noah and the apocalyptic flood. I don't know if this ever happened. But I know it's true. A mythic tale, after all, is something that never was but always is.

*Once upon a time God became disgusted with humankind because of its violence, all that senseless killing of each other. So God decided to kill everybody with a massive flood and start over. And God did just that.*

But at the end of the tale, after the massive destruction, God repented, which is to say, God had a change of heart. And thus the story ends with a rainbow and a promise as if to say, *violence cannot end violence. Another way must be found.*

Which brings us to the gospel story of Jesus in the wilderness. Which looks very much like a vision quest. This story is also mythic for the wilderness is not only external, it's also internal. It's not once in a lifetime; it's a perennial quest to find ourselves and our way through troubling times time and time again. As Anne LaMott put it in her book *Small Victories*: "We don't always get what we want or even what we need; we get what we get and we take it from there."

**Mark 1:9-15**

*Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. As he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove. A voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And then just like that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. For forty days he was tempted by Satan. He was with wild beasts; and angels waited on him.*

"Tempted," is better translated "tested." Jesus was "tested" as metal is tested, the way certain questions and situations test us and shape our destiny.

*After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

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I recently learned that the vision of ISIS includes Jesus, who, in case you didn't know, is one of Islam's most revered prophets. The Islamic State is *Islamic* just as it states. But ISIS represents Islam the way the Davidians of Waco, Texas or the Ku Klux Klan represents Christianity. Which only goes to show: every tradition has its whackos—some more dangerous than others.

ISIS has a grand vision.

Don't be fooled. Bombs will not destroy their vision. Nor will jobs, education, or Starbucks gift cards pacify these fanatical warriors. They are not interested in trinkets.

Of course, one motive doesn't fit all. If you'd like to know more, read Graeme Wood's piece on ISIS in the March issue of *The Atlantic* or Michael Weiss' book: *Inside the Army of Terror*.

Some ISIS fighters just want a paycheck. Some want a purpose in life. Some want revenge. Some are sociopaths.

And some are clearly compelled by a grand and glorious vision. They want nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth. And to get it they will destroy by any means necessary the wicked, the godless and impure in their eyes. Therefore, we in the godless West must die, as must infidels in their own religion. Hundreds of Sunnis and Shia have been killed by ISIS already.

In case you hadn't heard, these fanatics are itching for one final apocalyptic battle predicted by one of Islam's obscure prophesies. And they'd like nothing more than for the armies of the West to show up in the Levant to fulfill that prophecy.

By the way, Judaism and Christianity also have apocalyptic visions.

In Christianity it's called "The Battle of Armageddon." It inspired crusaders and it inspires certain Christians today.

According to the popular "Left Behind" version of Christianity, one day soon Jesus and his army will annihilate the wicked in a valley near Jerusalem. And then Christ and true Christians will reign over a peaceful world. (I'm pretty sure you and I are not the kind of "true Christians" they have in mind.)

Judaism has an apocalyptic vision, too. It's called "The Day of the Lord" and is referenced in the prophets often.

In all three traditions, the vision of judgment on the wicked is attributed to God. But these look to me like human projections, as does the apocalyptic flood story—wishful thinking projected onto "god" by frustrated, fearful and paranoid people who see the world in black and white, as either-or, as good versus evil.

That's dualism. Us against them. And it's deadly.

There is another way of seeing the world, of seeing as Jesus saw it with God's rain and sun falling on the righteous and the wicked. It's a vision of seeing all as one. Whole. It's the vision of Jesus and it doesn't come naturally. It requires repentance, which is to say, transformation of outlook and consciousness.

Jesus was born under the brutal heel of the Roman Empire, under a reign of terror. The Romans beheaded and crucified people by the thousands and displayed their heads or bodies along public highways.

Some Jews—understandably—took up the sword to kill the occupier and oppressor. Some took cushy jobs with the Empire. And some bailed out completely, hiding in the wilderness, waiting for God or Messiah to save them.

Those were real, existential choices for Jesus and may be the actual story behind the wilderness story. Jesus turned his back on those conventional paths and blazed another way. It is the way of compassion and non-violent resistance. Not passivity. Resistance. Non-violent resistance to evil and love without borders like this nation saw 50 years ago in Selma.

It's not a safe way. People get hurt. People die. Jesus died. This way takes more courage than the other ways combined.

ISIS has a vision for a new heaven and a new earth. So does Jesus. One takes life; the other gives life.

Yes, ISIS has a passionate vision. But passion is not enough. A holy vision must be shaped by wisdom and compassion. As it turns out, the *means* are as important as the *end*. We, too, long for a new heaven and a new earth. But how will we get there?

*Repent and believe in the good news.*

“Repent” translates the Greek word *metanoia*. Like *paranoia* “metanoia” has to do with thinking or outlook. *Paranoia* is disturbed thinking; *metanoia* is transformed thinking, the way a caterpillar is metamorphosed into a butterfly. Paranoia. Metanoia. Metamorphosis. Transformation.

Repentance is not about remorse. It's about change.

Repent. Be transformed and believe in the good news of God's kin-dom—which is the realm of love within you and around you right now, right here.

*Repent and believe.*

The word “believe” comes from the German word: “belove.” Which is to say, to *believe* in the vision of Jesus is to *belove* the vision, the possibility that a new heaven and new earth will arrive not by killing the wicked or anyone else; but rather by feeding, befriending, sheltering, blanketing, healing, bringing love wherever there is hatred, and pardon wherever there is injury for all people—including your own fearful, paranoid self cringing in the bomb shelter of your soul.

May the peace of Christ protect and transform you, all nations and people including ISIS.

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*The marvelous vision of the peaceable Kingdom, in which all violence has been overcome and all men, women, and children live in loving unity with nature, calls for realization in our daily lives. It challenges us to anticipate what it promises. Every time we forgive our neighbor, every time we make a child smile, every time we show compassion to a suffering person, every time we arrange a bouquet of flowers, offer care to tame or wild animals, prevent pollution, create beauty in our homes and gardens, and work for peace and justice among peoples and nations we are making the vision come true.*

**Henri J. M. Nouwen**  
Bread for the Journey