

God is Not Through

It would begin, like so many things, with darkness. On that day, as so many slept, or tarried, or carried on with their day as they always had, the purging would begin. Without warning, fire would rain down upon the world God had made, cleansing the fullness of creation of all evil, melting the dross away.

Already a sign had been revealed: a comet, stretching over the heavens, had been observed by those who waited and watched. And so, as the day approached, the faithful cut their hair, sold their possessions, and prepared themselves for the deliverance that was surely coming soon. They put on clean, white garments and climbed the nearby hills so that they might be closer to the heavens, closer to God, when salvation finally came.

Up on the mountaintops they kept watch, waiting for it to begin. But nothing happened. And as the sun set over the distant hills, and darkness fell once more, disappointment rained down upon the mountain top. Perhaps an error had been made? That had to be it.

The texts were consulted, and a new date was proclaimed, and again the people rallied, steeling themselves for that great day that surely was coming soon. More people than ever before, it seemed, gathered themselves on the edge of eternity and waited with expectation for what was coming. But again, the sun came and went, and as the darkness once again settled over the land, the people descended from the mountaintops, dispersed from one another and into the world they so dearly wished to depart, their hearts and their spirits divided over what it all had meant.

The Great Disappointment of 1843 was, if you haven't guessed from the name, a bit of a letdown for the followers of William Miller. Some in the media have called my generation, the Millennials, the disappointed generation, but I wonder if perhaps the Millerites might have beaten us to the honor of "most disappointed cohort." I don't think I would choose to trade places with the folks standing on the mountain with Bill Miller, with their impractical homemade dresses and freshly shorn heads, keenly aware that they had recently divested themselves of all their worldly possessions in anticipation of a moment that wasn't coming.

Then again, the Millerites had been so certain that they were onto something important. Their leader, a quiet and thoughtful farmer, respected by friends and neighbors, had never set out to be a prophet, but as he looked at the world around him, and as he read his bible, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was imminent.

As he studied the prophets, he thought he recognized echoes of the destruction and chaos around him—in the human costs of the American and French Revolutions, and his own experiences as a soldier during the War of 1812. The horrors of war became the crucible in which William Miller began to see his faith differently, and within the community of the Millerites, he found a hope that, while misplaced, sustained him and brought him through the dark night of his soul.

It feels appropriate at this juncture to acknowledge that it can be rather satisfying for many Christians, especially progressive Christians, to watch these end times prophecies fail to materialize. If we honest, we get more than a little satisfaction out of knowing that the night will come, and the day will break, and somewhere a false prophet will lose his or her wings. We tell ourselves that we would never rush to the mountain top or sell all of our possessions. We tell ourselves we are smart enough not to fall for false promises.

And yet. I find myself wondering: can we blame William Miller for experiencing the trauma of a broken world, and concluding that the only thing that could mend what had been wrent asunder was the return of the Lord? Can we honestly look at the world around us and say, this is fine?

Paul Tillich once observed that “if you find hope in the ground of history, you are united with the great prophets who were able to look into the depth of their times, who tried to escape it, because they could not stand the horror of their visions, and who yet had the strength to look to an even deeper level and there to discover hope.”

I feel compassion for the William Millers of this world. Because for all of his mistakes, William Miller was not all that different from us. He was trying his best to be a good, humble Christian person living in a world that suddenly felt dangerous, where good, innocent people were dying and suffering from war and poverty and sickness, and he struggled to make sense of it. As he looked out upon the wreckage, he found himself wondering: what could all of this suffering and ruin and brokenness possibly be **for**?

I say he is not all that different from us because not all that much has changed. We live in a moment when, if we are paying attention, there are so many things to be anxious about. For my entire adult life, our country has been sending battle ships and missiles and drone strikes and young men and women out into the world to fight wars in distant lands. Images of broken people in forsaken places, some of them suffering directly or indirectly because of the policies of our beloved country, have become so common that they have begun to blend together. Our swiftly warming planet has left many teenagers terrified of what the future will hold for them. Disappointment doesn't begin to touch the feelings of dis-ease that follow so many of us as we look at the world and wonder—what could all of this wreckage possibly be for?

So perhaps it is appropriate, this day more than ever, that we pause to reflect on what the prophets might have to offer to us at the threshold of Advent. To ask ourselves, what might it mean to put our suffering world in the context of the coming reign of God?

In our Gospel lesson today, it is easy to get caught up in the uncertainty of Jesus' words. To focus on the not-knowing-ness of the day of the Lord. But perhaps if we can set that aside for the moment and notice that, in the midst of all of the reminders that we will not know the day or the hour, and that it will come like a thief, our Lord and Savior offers us a promise: that in the midst of the chaos and suffering of the world, Jesus is still coming. There is no thing in this world that is so awful that it could stand in the way of promise of the coming Kingdom of God.

I don't know about you, but this year I find a great deal of comfort in knowing that, as bad as the world has been, God isn't finished with us yet. It helps me to know that we can name the

pain of the world, that we can hold it together as a community, and at the same time we can look forward to a day in which the scars borne by a suffering world will be healed over. The great womanist ethicist Emilie Townes describes this experience of communal lament as essential to Christian Hope. She says that:

When we grieve, when we lament, we acknowledge and live the experience rather than try to hold it away from us out of some misguided notion of being objective or strong. We hurt; something is fractured, if not broken...we are living in structures of evil and wickedness that make us ill. We must name them as such and seek to repent—not out of form—but from the heart. It is only then that we can begin to heal.

In other words, our healing, and the healing of the world, is bound up in our willingness to be here now. To forgo the distant mountaintop for the fellowship of the hurting. To stop wondering about the day and the hour which no one knows and instead get to the business of fashioning plowshares from swords, clothed not for battle but rather, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, adorned in the armor of light so that we might live honorable and full lives right here, right now, in this moment that we have been given. Instead of dwelling in dreams and fantasy of a future we cannot conceive of, we keep awake by doing what we can, while we can: by loving our neighbor, healing the sick and the broken, bearing witness to the injustice before us. For the hope of the Gospel is not found somewhere else, but right here, in how we make sense of the reality we have already been given.

In his book, the Scandalous Message of Jesus, Peter Gomes observes that “hope is not merely an optimistic view that everything will turn out right in the end. It is the more rugged, more muscular view that even if things don’t turn out all right and aren’t all right, we endure through and beyond the times that disappoint or threaten to destroy us.” This hope comes at a price, and requires work and effort on our part. It requires patience, and endurance, and even stubbornness, to believe that, however bad this moment is, God is not through with us. God will bear us through.

My husband will tell you that I am Christmas Grinch, which means that my eyes start to twitch when the Christmas music starts blasting in early November. But I find myself drawn on this morning to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s great Christmas hymn, perhaps you know it:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day, their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat, of peace on earth, good will to men!

I have always loved those words and their joyful melody. But what I had forgotten about that hymn are the verses that follow:

Then from each black, accursed mouth, the cannon thundered in the south
And with the sound the carols drowned of peace on earth, good will to men!
And in despair I bowed my head; ‘there is no peace on earth,’ I said;
‘for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.’

In Longfellow’s time, hope seemed like a fragile thing, for the darkness of our country had been broken open, and peace threatened by the violent reality of the Civil War. And so the poet wonders: can peace be possible in this world that we have made? I am reminded in this

moment that every generation of the faithful has had that moment when they are faced with the truth of how fragile is the line that separates life from death, order from chaos, peace from division. And in those moments, if we find ourselves unconnected to a community in which we can lament together and name the sorrow of this world, if we do not have a safe place to wail and to wonder, the danger is that we might be swallowed up by the darkness that threatens us. For it is in our fellowship with the people of God that we are returned to the hope that sustains us, the hope that insists that God is not through with us yet:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep; 'God is not dead, nor doth God Sleep;
The wrong shall fail; the Right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men.

The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of God endures forever. Amen.