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# God's Future: Personal, Pastoral, and Preaching Reflections

Katie Hays

By the time I was nine years old, I could contribute a strong alto to any hymn in *Great Songs of the Church*. The ones we sang most consistently and enthusiastically were of the genre "heaven songs," with lyrics that cheerfully describe the eschatological event of Jesus' return or our own deaths, whichever might come first, as well as the physical features of our eternal home with God. My parents took my sister and me to the nursing home on Sunday afternoons to sing along with the residents there:

> *This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through.*
> *If Heaven's not my home, then Lord, what will I do?*
> *The angels beckon me through Heaven's open door*
> *And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.*[1]

Once in a while Mom would get us out of our elementary school classes to help sing for a funeral. We had a familiar repertoire to share with the bereaved family:

> *I've got a mansion just over the hilltop*
> *In that bright land where we'll never grow old.*
> *And someday yonder, we will never more wander,*
> *But walk the streets that are purest gold.*[2]

On any given Sunday, we would celebrate the soon return of the Lord and the vindication that we would experience as the redeemed remnant:

> *Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon.*
> *Many will meet their doom, trumpets will sound.*
> *All of the dead shall rise, righteous meet in the skies,*
> *Going where no one dies, Heavenward bound.*[3]

At some point in my early adulthood, as one component of my spiritual journey away from the fundamentalism of my youth, I arrived at a place where heaven songs no longer brought the same comfort or pleasure they once had. I no longer yearned for escape from "this world"; I no longer believed that material wealth (streets paved with "purest gold") was the defining feature of God's future; I no longer reveled in the belief that I was among the few who would enjoy God's mercy while most everybody else

1. Lyrics from "This World is Not My Home."
2. Lyrics from "Mansion Over the Hilltop."
3. Lyrics from "Jesus is Coming Soon."

"met their doom." The hymnals were keeping pace, too: heaven songs were being culled from *a cappella* collections, and the *Chalice Hymnal* of my new denominational home includes almost no trace of old-school yearning for eschatological glory.

That's not to say that I haven't missed those songs. I can still sing them from memory, and I harbor strong nostalgia for the way they made me feel as a child. We were so certain. We might be small in number and so straight-laced as to draw the derision of our neighbors, but we were in the Gloryland way. Singing those songs gave me confidence in the future that lent strength to what I imagined was a difficult present: the pain of junior high drama, the suffering of high school trauma…. When I let go of those songs—when I let go of the beliefs that the songs reinforced—not only the end times but also the present moment became fraught with uncertainty.

As a pastor-preacher for almost twenty years, I recognize that this theological shift and subsequent spiritual grief is common to many members in the congregations I have served. I do not encounter many Christians who still believe that heaven is surrounded by bejeweled fencing with a single pearly gate for entrance and it has been many years since a Sunday school teacher drew on the chalkboard a map of Hell and Heaven with a place labeled "Abraham's Bosom" in between to explain the holding pattern for souls who await the bodily resurrection. But shedding the first naiveté concerning the last things has left us bereft. Our embarrassment over the heaven songs (and our embarrassment over the nostalgia we still feel for them) leads us to virtual silence concerning the eschatological vision of our ancestors in faith. We risk becoming the people of whom Paul spoke: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15.19). I feel it most acutely around the deaths of church members or their loved ones. We search the hymnal in vain for the songs that once comforted us in grief; we search our own vocabularies in vain for the language of last things and the great hereafter.

I host a theological reading group for mainline ministerial colleagues. A few months ago we read Catherine Keller's *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process,* in which Keller summarizes her work in apocalyptic theology as "signif[ying] a resolute alternative to both the literalization of apocalypse…." (Think here of Christ descending on a cloud, the sound of trumpet blast, the dead in Christ rising from their graves, those who are still alive caught up to meet Jesus in the clouds) "…[A]nd to a reactive secular anti-apocalypticism"[4] (in which what we can see is all there is, and thus where our focus should be, comprising a kind of religious anti-apocalypticism, focused exclusively on the here and now, social justice for our neighbors, the human-initiated completion of what God began to do on earth in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ but did not finish, and now it's our turn to make it all right).

Drawing on Jürgen Moltmann, Keller describes a "counter-apocalypse" in which God unveils vast possibilities for the epilogue of human history, inviting humankind to transform the present by imagining ourselves into God's gorgeous future. If we ignore those eventual possibilities, described in the metaphorical language of almost every biblical genre, Keller says, "we are neglecting the lure" of God's future and thus living a stunted and distorted present.[5]

I told my colleagues that I found this section of Keller's book helpful for the articulation of my own yearning not only for God's future but also for language to share that yearning with my church, expecting to hear their agreement that this is a pastoral gap that needs filling. But my colleagues were scandalized by my admission. "It's just not part of our theology," one insisted. "We never bring it up, that stuff about the Second Coming or the Apocalypse— that imagery is so messed up it can't be used well."

I countered that indeed we do bring it up every time we stand at the Lord's Table. In Disciples churches, we recite the Words of Institution from 1 Corinthians 11.23–26 while we break bread and pour from a pitcher to a cup every Sunday. "For as often as [we] eat this bread and drink the cup," I say each week, "[we] proclaim the Lord's death—*until he comes*."

"Oh," countered my colleague, "I never say that last part, 'until he comes.' I just don't want people to get the wrong idea."

4. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 167.

5. Ibid.

You gasp. I wince. But I understand what he meant. Let me try to say what I think the "wrong idea" might be, even after we have let go of the historical-critical decoding project that requires the literalizing of every metaphor and image in Revelation (and the other apocalyptic literature in the Bible).

The wrong idea is that we, as we imagine God's future renovation of the world God loves, will imagine ourselves as relating to the persecuted, oppressed, no-power-having, meeting-in-secret, barely surviving Christ-loving minority of the early generations of the church. Those little folks, every one of whom was a potential martyr, whispered the scenes of Revelation to each other like a delicious fantasy…like an audacious and absurd forecast not only about their crucified and exalted Lord but also, by extension, about themselves. The lamb that was slain is the only one worthy to open the seals on the scroll —and we are like the lamb, ourselves small and vulnerable and a potentially delicious snack for the political powers that want to eat us up…but someday glorified alongside the lamb, exalted in impossible contrast to our present, abysmal circumstances.

So it is impossible for me to read Revelation and imagine most of us mainstream American churchgoers as those people for whom this message was originally meant as a lifeline, a necessary dose of sanity-preserving hope in an otherwise bleak, Dickensian existence. One has only to think about the room last night where we gathered for worship: how many Smartphones were in the room? How many iPads? How many college degrees? It felt strange to me to be singing a song with the repeated chorus, *"This is how we overcome, this is how we overcome."*[6] Overcome what, exactly?

In what sense are we oppressed and endangered because of our Christian beliefs? In our democratic system the president is a Christian, two-thirds of the Supreme Court is Christian, and just about every member of both houses of Congress is Christian. The power structure of our government, in other words, is inhabited by people not all that different from ourselves. We enjoy unprecedented freedom to practice our faith, unprecedented support to display our faith, unprecedented permission to argue publicly for (or about) our faith, unprecedented access to power and wealth and education, and personal success not in spite of our religious affiliation, but in large part because of it. We are not Revelation's intended audience, not in that way. And it feels dangerous to me—and to my colleague who won't say, "until he comes"—to imagine otherwise.

We've been called upon to open our imaginations, our mind's eye, to the scenes painted with words in Revelation, and I agree completely with our previous panelists that imagination is the right vehicle for taking in the theological claims of this book, the vivid pictures it draws of God and God's own imagined future for the world God loves. But to imagine ourselves in the scenes as the put-upon, the persecuted, who will someday be airlifted to safety from a world that hates us—as if it's currently and consistently really, really hard on us to keep our discipleship commitment, hard like it was for our earliest ancestors in the faith, is a farce. We are not mostly oppressed martyrs, and to imagine ourselves so is a distortion of reality and an abdication of our responsibility as the richest, best educated, least-bothered-by-an-oppressive-ruling-class people in history. Indeed, globally speaking, we *are* the ruling class and, if we grab onto that fact, Revelation becomes yet another terrifying prophetic biblical account of the obliteration of empire in God's future. There's little comfort in that for us.

There remains, however, the tricky little problem of mortality. No amount of education or money or technology or power can solve that one for us. Everybody—even in lucky, lucky, lucky North American congregations populated by the richest people in history—dies. Everybody dies. And along the way to dying, we accumulate the real and significant sorrows that accompany dying people. And so you can see my dilemma, as both a person of privilege and a person of faith: I have come to this place where I must have the pastoral language of Revelation, the comforting vision of the *apocalypsis* of God's dreams for the world God loves and thus also for me and for the people I serve. But I am all too aware of the ease with which this book can be misunderstood and misappropriated. So I hesitate.

Here, then, is what I've attempted to do in preaching Revelation. Twice in the last several years I have designed multi-week sermon series that attempt to relay the comfort and challenge of the apocalyptic vision of scripture in that third way that Keller describes, a way that opens our imaginations to the vast possibilities for the future God envisions for all God's people (that is, *all* people), which subsequently empowers us to endure

6. Lyrics from "This is How We Overcome."

the real sorrows of life here and now, while not encouraging contemporary hearers to assume a false identity as the especially persecuted remnant on the basis of our Christian faithfulness.

For one such series I selected four texts from Revelation to preach on successive Sundays. I titled the series “When God Gets Everything God Wants,” riffing off Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s book *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* and Rob Bell’s *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.* “When God gets everything God wants” became sermonic shorthand for the entire eschatological vision of scripture.

The first sermon in that series was from Revelation 5.1–14, the text we heard preached last night. Time does not permit me to preach the entire sermon I offered to my congregation, but here I share an excerpt as an example of the third way I’m trying to articulate, recovering the pastoral help and necessity of the apocalyptic vision without succumbing to the temptation to triumphalism.

Here’s Rev 5.6, to remind you of the passage: “Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”

…

But no one can open the scroll. (God seals scrolls the way my mom wraps birthday presents for mailing, secured with so much packing tape you need a butcher knife to get inside.) John says, “[N]o one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open it, or even peek inside.” And like an exhausted eight-year-old overwhelmed with excitement and disappointment, John starts to cry.

One of the otherworldly court attendants consoles him, tells him to dry his eyes and wait just a minute. There is someone coming, he says, who can open this scroll. There is someone strong enough, powerful enough, courageous enough to take that scroll from God’s hand and rip into it. The one we’re waiting for is described as a lion, a royal descendant of David, a mighty conqueror. A manly man. A superman. Picture whomever you like here— your redeemed imagination is supposed to have been unleashed by the genre, remember? Maybe the one we’re waiting for looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime. Not the governor, but the terminator from his first movie career. We’re ready, John is ready, for his dramatic entrance. Maybe he’ll crash through the wall or rappel down from the vaulted ceiling of the throne room.

And then John notices something out of the corner of his eye that he hasn’t seen before: a strange creature that apparently has been present all along, hidden amongst the beastly choir members. A small creature, stepping out silently. This is no conqueror. This is no descendant of David—or at least not one David would have been proud to claim. This is no lion. This creature is a lamb. Not even a full-grown sheep. A little lamb.

It’s not an ordinary lamb, however; this one has extra eyes, extra horns. Seven of each, to be exact. The number of completeness. The number of wholeness. This is the lamb of lambs, the über-lamb, the lamb to end all lambs.

Not only that, but it’s a bloody lamb, with a hemorrhaging gash across its throat. Its wool, once white as snow, is soiled with blood mixed with the ashes of the altar upon which it has so recently lain. This is a sacrificial lamb, a ritually slaughtered animal for the forgiveness of sins, a scapegoat, a delicious Passover entrée. This pathetic creature hobbles silently out of the crowd, limps gingerly to the throne, and takes the scroll from the hand of God.

And so we are shown even here, in the great hereafter, that when God gets everything God wants, Jesus remains what he always was: the Lamb of God. Remember when John the Baptist first started calling him that, way back when? It was an ominous nickname at best, but it fit. Jesus was lamblike: gentle, defenseless, a wanderer who depended on the goodness of others for his meals. This is the humble messiah who could be mistaken for a yardman on the very morning of his resurrection. It’s as if, in the vestry behind the throne room of heaven, he tried on the Lion of Judah outfit, he tried on the Son of David, the conquering king costume, and each time said, “Enh, it’s just not me.” The humble, vulnerable Lamb of God is what he was, and what he is, and what, evidently, he shall be.

Because as it turns out, the throne room of God is not a place where the sufferings and failures of this life are erased as if they never happened. It is a place where the pain endured here is remembered, where the

marks of failure are worn, where indeed worthiness is measured by the sufferings we have endured. The hair loss of another round of chemotherapy, the scars of abuse that you try not to look at in the mirror when you undress at night, the furrowed brow of worry over the one kid who didn't turn out as you had hoped, the circles under your eyes from long nights spent by your life partner's hospital bedside, the lines that grief has carved into your cheeks, the calloused knees from a lifetime of hopeful and desperate prayer…if the slaughtered lamb of Revelation 5 is any indication, these marks are ours to keep. They are the marks of our lives, marks that are honored in God's future, not erased.

…

The sermon goes on, but I will not. May the God of our slaughtered Lamb and Lord bring you comfort in this world and in the eventual world of God's imagining.

**Katie Hays** is a pastor-preacher in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She has served congregations of the Christian Church (DOC) and the Churches of Christ in Alabama, New York, Georgia, and Texas. In the summer of 2013, Katie embarked on a new adventure: planting a new congregation for Millennials and other spiritual refugees in Mansfield, Texas, where she lives with her husband, Lance Pape, and two kids (katie@galileochurch.org).