

“Back to the Future”

Sermon – November 5, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

In Ray Bradbury's 1951 science fiction novel, *The Illustrated Man*, the unnamed narrator is speaking with the titular character who claims his tattoos tell of the future; the narrator then asks him about the tattoo artist. He says, “[She said she could travel in time and] went back to the future.”

This phrase became better known as the title of a 1985 movie that you may be familiar with starring Michael J. Fox.

While the bible does not deal in time travel, there is a certain timelessness with God. The eternal nature of God and God’s presumed omniscience (all-knowing) makes the nature of time abstruse, that is, hard to understand.

In a similar vein the Revelation to John is a challenge to understand. It is a book that really requires a bible study to try to understand it because of the all the imagery and symbolism in it. In part because of this, we do not read from this book often. In fact, in this lectionary year today’s passage is the only one from Revelation.

Despite this, the book has caught the imagination of many, particularly as prediction of a future where Christ will return and destroy all the bad people—those who don’t believe—and save all the true believers. In some versions there is a belief that true believers will be taken up first, then a 1000-year of turmoil, then a final battle and final chance to repent. And there are other variations.

We don’t have time to delve into all that today, but in short, we in the Reform faith have a different view, as I borrow now liberally from Professor W. Eugene March at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

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We approach the subject of the “end times” with one central affirmation:

God alone is sovereign and free. All that is has been created by God.

Time flows from God’s initial act of creation, through God’s acts of redemption, until God’s full purpose is finally accomplished.

Through Scripture, and as witnessed by God’s people across the centuries, the one God is known to be gracious and loving. God intends good for the whole of creation. In Jesus Christ God has dramatically and uniquely revealed the goal of the divine purpose: reconciliation, justice, peace, wholeness, the “good” that marked each part of God’s first creation.

In contrast, there are those that say the church — particularly the mainline Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church — is corrupt beyond reclamation. Only the return of Christ can right things. Until that time Christians must just pray and wait.

Evoking fear (and contributions to their coffers) seems to be the prime pursuit of many end-of-the-world-soon preachers. Presbyterians, however, emphasize confident hope over against such extreme optimism or pessimism.

Confident hope is founded on belief in the goodness, mercy and reign of God. In Jesus Christ, God has acted to defeat the power of sin, although humans continue to sin. By raising Christ from the dead God has declared the divine intention to redeem creation. Nothing, not even death, will finally thwart God’s will.

In the assurance that Jesus will one day return to celebrate the fulfillment of God’s purpose, believers can sustain confident hope. Christ’s followers hope in God, not themselves. Rather than being anxious

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and pessimistic, God’s people trust hopefully and live joyfully because in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has revealed the divine purpose of well-being for all.

To those obsessed with trying to work out a timetable for Christ’s return, Presbyterians say, “Only God knows, but God has given us important work to do in the meantime.”

And what is that work? It is to do the will of God and that will is to love. As 1 John 3:1 says in today’s lectionary, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

Now John was writing to a community that was both split and persecuted. Some people following Jesus believed him to be a prophet, but they left the community because they denied that Jesus was the Christ and the incarnate Son of God.

The community was also being persecuted by the Romans and felt it was them against the world and indeed it was—for a while.

Eventually, though, this love-based religion based on worshipping God and not mortal emperors *and* helping others, particularly the downtrodden, overtook Rome. Many martyrs and others were persecuted and killed promoting those beliefs, but eventually love, mercy, and peace prevailed—all those characteristics that Jesus mentions in the Beatitudes that we heard as the gospel lesson today from Matthew 5.

In fact, Jesus says those with those characteristics are blessed—not so much in the sense that it is good to suffer but rather that they are honored for trying to do the right thing despite being persecuted.

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Christians and Christianity in the U.S., though, are not the persecuted minority in John’s time. In fact, elements of them are more like the Romans, valuing power and prosperity while persecuting those who do not.

We need to get back to the future of our faith, back to the message of Jesus, back to honoring the poor, the meek, the justice-seekers, the merciful, the peacemakers.

The world does not see this today as what it means to be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ. It is up to us to reveal that to the world and to stand up to those who opposed it, particularly those who have perverted the message of Christ.

As now-retired Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson, said, “It’s funny, isn’t it? That you can preach a judgmental and vengeful and angry God and nobody will mind. But you start preaching a God that is too accepting, too loving, too forgiving, too merciful, too kind...And you are in trouble.”

And that is the trouble we should welcome. That is what the saints who came before us sought and have passed on the responsibility and accountability for us to carry despite the obstacles until that time when for those who have come out of the great ordeal:

“...will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.