

PROVOKING WHILE WE WAIT

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

David B. Keller

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TEXT: Hebrews 10:24 ff “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds . . . encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

PURPOSE: To urge us to respond to the calamities currently affecting the world not with despair, but with hope which expresses itself in love and good deeds.

Some of us persons of a certain age remember songs from the sixties. Yes, the good old days of meaningful lyrics. Who remembers the song made popular by an otherwise obscure artist named Barry McGuire called “Eve of Destruction”? The always helpful internet informed me that McGuire wasn’t the composer, and that it was recorded by a number of other bands, including, believe it or not, by The Turtles. The lyrics refer to wars, to the threat of nuclear annihilation, and to racial injustice, always ending with the refrain, “You tell me you don’t believe we’re on the eve of destruction.” In other words, the singer accuses his audience of not recognizing the dreadful scope of our predicament.

Fifty-six years after McGuire recorded the “Eve of Destruction,” many of the issues it raised are still with us, and, at least one more, one very big one, has been added to the list, and that is the climate crisis. Who would have imagined back then that there could be a threat greater than nuclear war? Nuclear war would make for a speedy end to the world as we know it. Global warming moves much slower. But we’ve already pushed the button unleashing it, and unless the humans on the planet drastically change our ways, more climate caused destruction is inevitable.

There is a genre of biblical literature known as “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic literature presents a battle of cosmic proportions between the forces of evil and the forces of good, with good winning in the end. The most famous apocalypse is the Book of Revelation. Today’s passage from the Gospel of Mark introduces what is called Mark’s “Little Apocalypse” which imagines creation collapsing into chaos and the followers of Jesus suffering terrible persecution before Jesus returns and asserts God’s rule over all that is. In the passage we just heard, Jesus predicts the coming of false messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, and earthquakes and famine. Those troubles were real back then, and remain real now. Only now, we can add lots of other disruptions to the list. Racial injustice, superstorms, massive wildfires, a deadly pandemic, and lies from the mouths of would-be leaders certainly can get us wondering whether we are in the real end-times. One line in the Eve of Destruction says it all: “This whole crazy world is just too frustrating.”

Perhaps you've followed the news from the "COP 26" climate conference in Scotland. I've not paid really close attention, but I've heard enough to know that the countries most responsible for climate-warming practices, including us, are doing everything they can to lessen the impact of any strategies for slowing our planet's warming on their economies. There's been plenty of rhetoric recognizing the extent of the threat, but even the United States is bucking recommendations that would track how well we're keeping our promises to do something about it. In our country, every piece of climate policy is required to bow down before the god called "the economy."

And that's just the crisis of climate change, which I believe is the existential crisis of our time. What we know is that there's a whole lot more going on in our world which appears to be of apocalyptic proportions. The pandemic has killed millions of people and created enormous disruptions in every aspect of our lives, from supply chain snags to health care breakdowns, and even to how churches sustain themselves and carry out our mission. The politicization of public health policies designed to put the pandemic in our rear view mirrors has reached the level of lunacy. The exposure of racial injustice and entrenched racism in our culture has further divided our country into opposing camps, with one camp saying we need to learn more about racism in order to overcome it, and another insisting that such learning is useless at best and designed to teach people to 'hate America' at worst.

So what? How in the world are we to respond in the face of these overwhelming, interconnected, apocalyptic events? We could align ourselves with the people Barry McGuire accused of not believing we're on the eve of destruction. Or we could conclude that the destruction is inevitable, and choose to do nothing to arrest it. Or we could do the Christian thing, which is to be embraced by a hope which holds on no matter what, a hope which is realized in actions on our part that conform to God's vision of a healed creation. Listen again to this powerful word of encouragement from the Letter to the Hebrews, which is more like an extended sermon than like a letter: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:23-25) "The Day" is the Bible's shorthand for "the Day of the Lord" – in apocalyptic imagery, the final battle between good and evil.

At the Day approaches, faith calls us not to cynicism nor to denial, but to provoking one another to love and good deeds. How about that? We get to provoke each other! According to this guidance, preaching in these times should be provocative, not comforting. Our interactions should push us into doing good deeds – to living in ways which shrink our carbon footprint; and embracing practices which contribute to the common good. We should be provoking each other to love, sure, to loving people close to us, but also, to loving people who are in the most difficult of circumstances, and, at the same time, to loving people who are rich and powerful and whose business and political actions contribute to the crises which affect us all.

Here's one provocative word: the reason we are in a climate crisis is because we consume too much. As long as we think that we need more and better stuff – that new mobile device, that gas-guzzling truck selling for 60 grand, those granite countertops in our kitchen, whatever, we are contributing to the warming of our planet. As long as we destroy forests and animal habitat, we increase the likelihood that viruses like Covid-19 will make the animal-to-human jump which winds up killing untold numbers of humans. As long as sound, science based policies must yield before the god of 'the economy,' and the other god known as "individual rights," we can expect the world to suffer more because of our wanton exploitation. What is really needed is to shrink our economy, not grow it. Wendell Berry, who in my opinion is as anointed as any of the Biblical prophets with the capacity for declaring the God's honest truth, wrote that, "we must achieve the character and acquire the skills to live much poorer than we do. We must do more for ourselves and each other."¹

It is critically important to understand the purpose of biblical apocalyptic literature. The purpose has never been merely to predict an inevitable future. Nor has it been to advise people of faith to get on some kind of salvation lifeboat and let the rest of the human race be condemned. All apocalyptic literature is designed to encourage hope that cannot be disappointed, hope that finds its life in love and good deeds. As many people of faith have said, when Jesus returns to set things right with the world, I'd rather he found me serving people in a soup kitchen than reading my Bible. After all, the writer of Hebrews reminded his hearers long ago, "[God] who promised is faithful." God does not renege on God's promises. God is more than strong enough to keep God's promises, which all boil down to letting God's kingdom be established on earth the way it is perfectly established in

¹In an article written by Ragan Sutterfield, *Climate Change is a Symptom*; in *The Christian Century* Vol. 138, No. 19, September 22, 2021.

heaven.

My internet exploration related to the “Eve of Destruction” song revealed that the song had been banned in some parts of our country and in England, and that a number of radio stations refused to play it. The BBC forbade it being played on “general entertainment programmes.”² I suppose it was considered ‘too provocative.’ Probably it provoked in the same spirit as the author of Hebrews wanted his readers to provoke each other.

Yes, the world is a mess. The eve of destruction appears to be closer now than it was a generation ago. The threats to life on this planet appear to be far more intense and unavoidable than ever. But, God is faithful. God keeps God’s promises. And God’s most solemn promise is that the realm of God which is in heaven will certainly be established here on earth as well. These days, it certainly seems that the final fulfilling of that promise is a long way off. But God’s timing is not our timing. For people who trust God to keep the promise, these days of waiting for the Day to come offer opportunities for us to align our actions and our values with it. That begins by provoking each other to love and to good deeds.

Who knows what expressions of love have the capacity to turn the world around? I don’t, but I’m sure God does. Who knows which good deeds will save which lives? I don’t, but I’m sure God does. And also, I know this for sure: the more we encourage each other, the more we love extravagantly and act justly, the more we are aligned with God’s dream for this beautiful, fragile world and all the creatures inhabiting it, including the human ones.

²[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eve_of_Destruction_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eve_of_Destruction_(song))