

When the Heavens Open
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Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37
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You have this life. God has given it to you with the expectation that it will have meaning and purpose and it is moving along. You are the steward of this life. No one else can do that for you.

This past week, I read two stories in the news about lives being lived incredibly well – not in the high on the hog sense, but just with incredible value and humanity.

Maurice Rowland and Miguel Alvarez were members of the staff of Valley Springs Manor. Maurice was a cook and Miguel was a janitor.

But their roles changed abruptly when the facility where they worked shut down without taking care of the residents who lived there.

For three days, until the Fire and Police departments were able to take over, they were left with 16 residents of the assisted living center when the staff stopped getting paid and most left. But Maurice and Miguel had a conversation in the kitchen about caring for the residents, some of whom suffered from dementia.

Alvarez said, "If we would have left, they wouldn't have nobody."

Rowland said, "I just couldn't see myself going home — next thing you know, they're in the kitchen trying to cook their own food and burn the

place down," he said. "Even though they wasn't our family, they were kind of like our family for this short period of time."¹

There are turning points in each of our lives where we are offered choices. How we decide leaves an indelible mark on our very selves. The last line of the StoryCorps broadcast of Maurice and Miguel was, "If I would have left, I would have had that on my conscience for a long time."

The things that we do sort of get into us, don't they?

I don't know whether Rowland and Alvarez spent much time in the moment thinking of the consequence of their decisions – just that they did what they did because they knew they needed to.

There are surely times of consequence in each of our lives, aren't there? It may seem odd to think of these things when the scriptures today seem so apocalyptic. I know most of us probably avoid those sections of the bible, but they have a point. They are there for a reason...

When you read the apocalyptic parts of the bible, do your eyes glaze over? Or do they pique your curiosity?

The history of interpretation of scripture is littered with incorrect doomsday predictions. I used to get particularly tickled by attempting to come up with the most nonsensical versions possible in order to utterly discredit that particular (wrong) way of reading Scripture, and there are some doozies to be sure, but I wonder if we take these passages seriously enough?

¹ NPR News, November 21, 2014

They have a history of course.

Some whole books of the bible are apocalyptic, of course, like the book of Revelation, but mostly there are just passages that are slipped in amongst other passages of the bible. They occur in the Old Testament (such as what we read from Isaiah) as well as the new, such as what we read from Mark, and for the most part they stick out like a sore thumb. They seem to make no earthly sense whatsoever.

You'll be reading along through Mark's Gospel, for instance, and in the middle of parables and miracles and healings, there will crop up a strange series of verses where it appears that Jesus has been transported to almost another dimension. He starts talking about things like the heavens being opened, or the stars falling from the sky, or mountains quaking. Generally there are clouds involved, sometimes trumpets, and angels are hovering somewhere nearby.

It's fantastical and it's supposed to be. It's certainly not meant to be taken literally – bad theology abounds when it is taken literally, and the ancients would never have done so. They knew it was intended to be evocative.

It's supposed to evoke, not educate on future activities.

What it is supposed to *evoke* in us is a feeling that something more is happening than we can see in the present tense.

It can't quite be decoded. There's no par for par equivalency between actions or characters in apocalyptic and real-life. The Roman emperor

might be the beast in one selection and a dragon in another. There are a few other choice turns of phrase that describe that particular individual, but the point is we're supposed to hear them and know that whatever present circumstances might look like, that what we're looking at now isn't the whole story.

The whole story is always the story of the unfolding urgency of God's grace and God's redemptive power at a foundational level and for those under bad circumstances. These fantastical renderings of what God is going to do are a marker that, no matter what happens, God remains the bedrock on which all of creation rests and in God's redemptive judgment, injustices will not be allowed to stand.

Apocalyptic is language for oppressed communities, and I wonder sometimes if it has much to say to those of us who aren't feeling all that oppressed.

Because whenever privileged people start talking about oppression, we need to be sure of two things: First, that we don't confuse ourselves for the oppressed. There are a lot of different ways to be treated badly.

That's not the same as oppression. Second, we need to be certain that we don't substitute our own understanding of what it means to be held down and marginalized for that of those who actually are.

Because if we don't learn and know what is really going on then pretty much anything we have to say on matters of oppression is going to miss the mark. My friend Regina Langley tells me that it is only when we

understand what we *don't* understand that we can have an honest conversation about oppression.

When the language of oppression is used by the privileged to refer to garden variety annoyances, it is almost proof-positive that it is resting on a foundation of cheap, trite grace.

You know what I mean by that. It's grace without consequence.

It's grace without impact.

Under no circumstances should we maintain a trite understanding of grace.

Because surely our lives are of consequence, aren't they?

Perhaps you've read the novella, The Picture of Dorian Gray. It's a marvelous little book by Oscar Wilde, one of the great wits of history.

The premise of the book is simple. Dorian Gray has an enchanted portrait – it is painted when he was a young man – and the enchantment is that he can do anything he wants in his life – and the effects will only show on the portrait. He can live an utterly debauched life and he will pay no physical consequence for it – but the portrait will show absolutely everything.

Which, of course, Gray does, and the picture becomes hideously deformed and monstrous as his misdeeds of excessive living – alcoholism and opium consumption, sexual relations treated casually while the other thought they were serious commitments – the misdeeds pile up and the portrait grows ever more grotesque.

Wilde's point is that what we do marks us at a deep level – much deeper than the skin.

Our lives are of consequence, and so God's grace cannot be inconsequential.

The apocalyptic passages of the bible are small in-breakings of the assurance that God will, in the final estimation, *not* allow grace to be inconsequential.

I know that these apocalyptic passages sometimes appear to be so wrathful.

Do you know what God's wrath is? It's God's love denied.

God is good, and God is love, and God's love always wins. Wrath is the mechanism by which God's love ultimately prevails, because make no mistake about it, God's love *always* prevails.

These apocalyptic road-markers are reminders that no matter what we think is going on – all of creation – the whole shebang, the universe and everything inside and outside it, are resting on the bedrock of God and God has certain values that do not change.

Grace is the in-breaking of *God's* reality into *present* reality with the assurance that God will settle for nothing less than what is good.

That is why grace is so significant. It's never cheap or trite, except perhaps in our own minds.

I watched a marvelous movie last week, *Quartet*.

It features the magnificent Maggie Smith and Billy Connolly, and it is set in the Beecham House Home for Retired Musicians. It was where opera singers and musicians would go to retire and live out their days. It centers on two characters, Reggie and Jean, who were briefly married and whose pinnacle of their respective careers was a particular quartet from Rigoletto for which Reggie received nine curtain calls and Jean, twelve. And after that their lives spectacularly fell apart in ways that are never fully expressed – only that Jean, under the effects of too much champagne, indulged a fling that destroyed the marriage. Fate brings them back together in their dotage at Beecham House. When Jean and Reggie confront one another, she recites a rehearsed speech. Reggie storms off.

Jean follows him until she corners him in a church.

Then she repeats her rehearsed speech.

Back and forth they go – bitterness meets contrition. Pride meets love.

Vanity makes a few appearances.

How do often bitterness, pride and vanity stand in the way of grace?

It is only after time that healing can enter in. Of course, in the end, they sing the quartet.

God's goodness is never contained in rehearsed prayers or prepared speeches. Always God's grace emerges at the intersection of honesty and humanity.

When I say that there are times of consequence, I do not mean there are times when you will be made to pay. I mean there are times when clarity dispels the possibility of self-deception and you know how things are and you know what must be done.

Apologies to our opera singers, but I can't resist the analogy: apocalyptic is the opera of the Bible. It's grand. It's bold. It's meant to make a statement.

And that statement is the reassurance to the oppressed community that God's love is still the bedrock on which all of creation rests.

And that statement is also the reassurance to the privileged community that God's love will permit no convenient self-deceptions.

Our lives are precious gifts and they are moving along, and there is nothing without consequence, good or bad, in the final estimation.

Apocalyptic is vivid (like Opera) and so I expect the images of sin and grace that this sermon evokes are vivid as well.

But goodness and justice are frequently lived out in less apocalyptic ways. So, the other story I heard this week came from the BBC.

Ruby Holt, 101 years old, had never seen the ocean.

Mark Davis, executive director of Brookdale's Sterling House in Tennessee, where Ms. Holt lives, said two employees filled out the application for her after finding out that she wanted to see the ocean for the first time. It turns out that two of the employees were having a water-gun fight one day and that led to the topic of water, which led to the subject of the

beach and then Ms. Holt, who has four children, said she was always too busy on the farm or working in a shirt factory to travel and that the family never had enough money.

The holiday to the beach in Alabama was the furthest she had ever been from her home in Giles County. Ms. Holt said she had only left the state of Tennessee once before.

"When we got to the room yesterday she was just pointing out the ocean and, you know, her facial expressions and... she was just speechless."²

No, decidedly, all of life is not apocalyptic. Sometimes it's rather simple. But it is always of consequence.

You have this life. God has given it to you with the expectation of meaning and purpose, and it is moving along. You are the steward of your life. No one else can do it for you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² BBC News, 21 November 2014