

I

The traffic on the freeway had come to a complete stop, and as I sat there in what was quickly becoming a giant parking lot, I took note of a bumper sticker on the car just ahead.

With big red letters against a bright yellow background, it said, Warning: In case of rapture, this car will be driverless.

I didn't really intend to ponder the end of all things as I sat there on the freeway, but I had nothing else to do, and the traffic was so bad it was beginning to look like I might be right there for eternity, so my mind drifted to that subject.

II

It's a natural human inclination, isn't it, to ponder the possibility of the end of all things? To my knowledge, we human beings are the only species on the planet who possess both the consciousness of the possibility of the end of the world, and for less than a century, we have possessed the ability to bring that into reality. And so from time to time, we all ponder what theologians call "eschatology," which means, literally, "words about the end."

And perhaps we find ourselves these days pondering it more than we have in years past. A quick glance at the news these days reveals that there are rumblings of yet another war in the Middle East. North Korea continues with its quest to develop a weapon capable of reaching our shores. And just

this week, I saw an online advertisement for bulletproof backpacks for school children. And all of those kinds of things can cause us to shake our heads and say, "What is this world coming to?"

A quick browse of the Christian literature section in the local bookstore doesn't make us necessarily feel any better. In the late 1970s, a book called *The Late Great Planet Earth* sold millions of copies. More recently, in the late 1990s, in the runup to the new millennium, a series of books called *Left Behind* also sold millions of copies, and the franchise was so successful that it became a movie series.

Tune into religious programming on your local cable access channel, and you're likely to hear preachers thundering about the approaching end times, some even with charts and graphs purporting to lineup carefully selected bible verses, stripped away from their original contexts and intended audiences, with current global events, and a few have even go so far as to predict the actual day and time of the end of all things, declaring that they have read these things plainly in the Scriptures.

To be fair, I believe that most of the folks who write and produce and preach this kind of stuff are women and men of sincere faith, even though they live out their faith on a branch of the Christian family tree pretty far removed from ours. It's also true that that if you want to get people's attention, if you want to sell books and movie tickets, if

you want to get people to follow you on social media, loudly and vividly predicting doom is always a proven formula.

So what do we think about eschatology - the end of all things? Or, perhaps more importantly, what does the Holy Spirit say about these things through the gift of the Scriptures?

III

Our text this morning comes to us from the Book of Revelation. If you'd permit me just a moment of personal privilege, it is your pastor's pet peeve when people refer to it as the Book of Revelations. That is not the title of the book. It is Revelation, singular, so named because it is a glimpse, a picture, a revelation of Jesus Christ, given by the Holy Spirit to a man named John of Patmos, who wrote down the vision so it could be handed down to us.

John of Patmos may or may not have been the same John who authored the Gospel According to John, or the books of First, Second, and Third John. He is called John of Patmos because he received this revelation while living on the island of Patmos between modern day Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea.

However, in John's day, the entire Mediterranean basin was controlled by the Roman Empire. On ancient Roman maps, the whole thing is simply labeled Mare Nostrum, which means "Our Sea." In John's day, the Roman Empire stretched from the

British Isles on the west to the Indian subcontinent on the east.

And as far as empires go, the Romans were religiously tolerant. Their subjects were free to worship any gods they chose, in whatever way they chose, so long as they acknowledged that the emperor was also a god. And by and large, most of their subjects had no problem with this policy, except one small group along the Eastern Mediterranean coast who called themselves the Jews, and a small but growing segment that had emerged from Judaism but who were now calling themselves Christians.

They kept insisting that there were not, in fact, many gods, but only one God, whom alone we must worship, and whom alone we must serve. And they kept insisting that God forbade them from worshiping any other gods, including worshiping the emperor or the king as a god.

John was not originally from Patmos. He was exiled to that tiny, desolate island in the middle of the sea by the Roman Empire, most likely for being so noisy and pesky about this idea that the emperor is not the ultimate power in the world.

Revelation is a notoriously difficult book to read and interpret. It's not linear or logical in its flow and sequence, and it's filled with vivid imagery and metaphors that were no doubt clear and significant for its originally intended audience, but that have been lost to us down through the

generations. John Calvin, our theological ancestor in the Presbyterian Reformed tradition, wrote commentaries on 63 of the 66 books of the bible. The ones he never got around to writing were Second John, Third John, and I'll let you guess the last one.

But that doesn't mean that Revelation doesn't have a word to offer us today. In fact, I think it offers a much-needed word in our world that seems to so often be spinning out of control.

The first thing that John sees is not an obliterated planet, like when the Death Star explodes at the end of Star Wars. No, John sees a new planet, a new heaven, and a new earth, except there is no sea. In John's day, the sea represented chaos and disorder. In the days before steam propulsion and modern navigation, the sea was a very dangerous place. And so all of the disorder and danger and chaos of the sea has been removed in the new earth in John's vision.

Then John sees Jerusalem coming down from heaven, prepared as a beautiful bride on her wedding day. If you know anything about world history, you know that Jerusalem has been the source of tension and fighting and violence for generations. The first Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire about 600 years before Christ, and the Second Temple was destroyed by the Roman empire about 60 years after Christ. But now

John sees not a desolated, devastated city, but a Holy and beautiful city.

And here's the part that really catches my ear. Coming down from heaven to earth. And then the voice from the throne says, "See, the home of God is among mortals."

Did you catch that? The movement is from heaven to earth. The movement is from God to us. At the end of all things, according to the text, we aren't snatched up into heaven, but rather, heaven comes to earth. At the end of all things, according to the text, the earth is not destroyed, but rather made new again. At the end of all things, according to the text, God will dwell with us, will wipe every tear from every eye. At the end of all things, it's not gloom and doom and disaster. At the end of all things, death and mourning and crying and pain will no longer exist.

IV

So let me ask you this, my sister, my brother. If what John sees is true, if the text can be trusted, if there really will come a day when death, and mourning, and crying, and pain will be no more, if there really will come a day when God will dwell among us and wipe every tear from every eye, then what's there left to be afraid of? If you know that in the end, all will be well, all will be well, all manner of things shall be well, does that change how you live today?

Because here's the dangerous thing about Easter. It makes people

unafraid of death and mourning and crying and pain. And Easter people who are unafraid of death and mourning and crying and pain are hard to control. In fact, Easter people have been known to take on empires. Easter people have been known to march from Selma to Montgomery, to face dogs and tear gas and billy clubs, because they know that Jesus is eternally right, and because they know that there will come a day when there will be no more tear gas and billy clubs. Easter people have been known to be noisy and insistent that there is only one God, whom alone we must worship, whom alone we must trust, whom alone we must serve. And nothing frightens empires and the powers and principalities of this world more than Easter people who trust in God's promises and are therefore unafraid of death and mourning and crying and pain.

V

And my sisters and brothers, as I look into our city, as I look across our state and our nation, as I look across the globe, I see a world sorely in need of some Easter people. We don't know what tomorrow holds. But we know the One who holds tomorrow. There's so much in this great big world of ours that is outside of our control. But not all of it is. God has entrusted us with what happens in our homes, in our workplaces, in our schools, in our communities. God has entrusted us with what happens in the space of our own hearts.

So may we go to those places this week and be intentional about being Easter people. May we go to those places trusting that this vision of John's, given to us through the Holy Spirit are trustworthy and true. May we go, knowing that empires come and empires go, but the kingdom of God will reign forever, and at the end of all things, the throne of God will be right here, among mortals.

To God be the glory. Amen.