

Sunday, November 18, 2012 (Daniel 12:1-3; Mark 13:1-8)

## **Apocalyptic visions generate fear. Fear needs its antidote: love.**

by [Stephen E. Fowl](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue

Do you know what the antidote for fear is?" the minister asked. The answer jumped into my head immediately. "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:17, NASB). But since it's generally frowned upon for a member of the choir in an Episcopal cathedral to shout out answers to rhetorical questions from the pulpit, I kept quiet. The preacher offered a very different answer and the sermon moved on.

By the time you read this meditation, the presidential election will be over. No matter what the result, no matter which candidate we elect, many people will be angry, anxious and fearful. Although I am neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, I predict that the traditional media outlets and the blogosphere will be full of apocalyptic visions that will stoke those anxieties and fears.

Scripture also contains a large amount of apocalyptic material. Christians familiar with these passages should be well prepared to deal with the apocalyptic scenarios that cable news and the blogosphere produce. Yet I find that we Christians are not much different from those around us.

Apocalyptic visions generate fear. This fear can be a good motive for action, particularly when your home is on fire or when a bus is barreling down on you as you cross the street. In such a situation fear may save lives—ours or another's. But when it comes to most other aspects of life, the fear induced by apocalyptic scenarios needs the antidote of love.

Without love, fear can truncate and focus our vision so narrowly that it renders us almost blind. Although sometimes this focus can save lives, for the most part the apocalyptic images that Jesus uses do not require split-second reactions. The reading from Mark 13 gives us just a taste of what is a chapter-long reflection on the end of life as we know it. Although we might want to ignore these passages,

Christians have no choice but to engage such apocalyptic visions seriously. Whether biblical or contemporary, they demand serious attention from us even if we are only going to reject them. The real question we confront is how to do this. How should we hear and respond to apocalyptic pronouncements, visions and hopes?

One path is to rely on the promise of a coming apocalypse to provoke a measure of fear, which in turn will lead us to a new course of action, to repentance. This, of course, is reminiscent of the message of John the Baptist. To John, it must have looked as if a bus were barreling down on him and everyone else. The time was short and called for immediate evasive maneuvers. "Repent," he preached urgently, "for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 3:1).

Then, at the beginning of Mark 13, Jesus issues his own warnings.

"For nation will rise against nation," he says, "and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." The disciples must have thought they were headed for just such a situation. No wonder they were concerned and afraid!

Yet for Jesus, the onset of apocalyptic times calls not for split-second judgments but for clear vision, faithful insight and patience. Fear is the enemy of all of these practices of faithful living in apocalyptic times. Fear narrows our vision so that we fail to see the good in those who disagree with us. Fear-induced blindness causes us to fail to see the great host of witnesses that surround, support and sustain us. Feeling alone and isolated, we become either desperate or despairing so that even angels may look like devils. Fear works to foreshorten our imaginations so that we both never truly understand the nature and shape of our problems and rarely appreciate the great variety of options for faithful living that are open to us.

Fear leads us to be impatient; we are tyrannized by our overwhelming need to do something right now before it is too late. For all sorts of reasons fear is compelling; it provides a focus and motive as well as the sense that we are doing something to save ourselves. The blindness that such a focus provokes, the distortions that come from acting out of fear and the impatience that fuels all our attempts to save ourselves will always short-circuit love, make us forget that only God can save us and lead us to treat others as obstacles that we must overcome.

Jesus' alternative is an invitation to be like those wise people awaiting the bridegroom's arrival. We need to cultivate a patient yet ardent desire for God to

arrive. This desire is not driven by either a sense of triumphal vindication or by fear of one's opponents. Instead it is sustained by our love for God and our eager hope for communion with the one who loves us without reserve.

The more apocalyptic our present seems, the more important it is for Christians courageously to rely on love to cast out fear. This is not only because relying on love to cast out fear is a comfort to us; relying on love can also be a service to the world. The reading from Daniel makes this point. When times are at their most turbulent, says Daniel, faith in a love that casts out fear will both make us wise and help us lead others to righteousness. This may prove to be one of the greatest ways in which the church can offer service to the world.