

Let the apocalyptic be what it is (Luke 21:25-36)

Trust your hearers. Trust the Spirit.

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How do you preach apocalyptic passages in Christian Testament literature? Well, one answer is don't. But since these texts can't be avoided, try this: treat them like the poetry they are.

We don't attend poetry readings to demand literalist interpretations of presented works. We listen with our ears and our bodies and our memories and our hopes as words wash over us. Sometimes connections are made, and authorial creativity is furthered in the hearer. Some images dredge up deep, unprocessed pain. Some turns of phrase delight us and remind us of the unrestrained joy that is often ours as human beings dwelling upon this good earth.

We let poetry be. We let poetry do.

Preaching from apocalyptic texts can be aided by such a method. Let the apocalyptic be what it is. Don't tamp down its hyperbole. Don't run from its fanciful and frightful elements. There is much of the fanciful and the frightful in the contemporary moment. People are equipped to deal with this rhetorical reality. Trust your hearers. Trust the Spirit.

Let apocalyptic do what it does. Let it challenge reason. Let it midwife questions of what is possible and what is impossible. Let it escort us to that lovely, liminal space where prose bows in humble adoration of the poetic.

Billy Collins, poet laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003, deserves an endowed chair in homiletics and hermeneutics for his poem "Introduction to Poetry." The speaker describes ways he asks students to consider a poem—as a beehive to listen to, as water to ski across, as a dark room in which to feel around for a light switch. "But all they want to do," writes Collins, "is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it."

Let's not torture a confession from the sun, moon, stars, and earth in Luke 21. Let the sea roar. Let the earth shake. Let the image of the coming Human One strengthen belief at a time of fainting hearts and equivocating faith. Listen to 1,000 sprouting fig trees declare that God's coming is as reliable as spring yielding to summer.

Don't tie this strange, beautiful, apocalyptic imagery to a chair with the frayed rope of explanation. Let it be. Let it do.

Poetry still works.