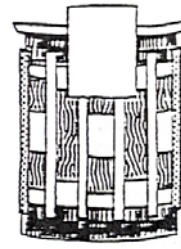


"Good News of the Apocalypse"  
Rev. Dr. David E. Gray  
Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church  
December 16, 2012  
Luke 3: 2-18



*from the*  
BRADLEY  
HILLS  
pulpit

Our second lesson builds on our scripture from last Sunday and the appearance of John the Baptist coming to prepare us for the arrival of Christ. Reading now from Luke chapter 3. Pray.

The story is told of a man arriving at the Pearly Gates ready for his interview with St. Peter. Peter was running down his list of questions on his clipboard and came to this one, "Can you share any experience in your life that was truly unselfish?" The man answered quickly, "Why yes, one day I was walking down the street and saw a lady surrounded by a group of thugs. I ran towards her, hustled her safely to a passerby, then went back and fought the whole pack by myself with my bare hands." St. Peter was impressed and said, "Tell me, when did this happen?" The man looked at his watch, "Oh, about five minutes ago."

Whether yesterday's pain is still fresh, as it was for this man and it is for the people of Connecticut today, or is a lingering memory. Whether we are concerned about a future encounter with judgment or are looking forward to the afterlife, Advent is a season that links past with future. It reminds us that we live now between the coming of a child 2000 years ago in a manger and the coming of Jesus again at the end of time.

Advent can be a season of memories and expectations. Ann Weems' poem we just heard underscores the pain of the season. And if you are like me you might be thinking about the past a lot this season. But at the same time, Advent looks forward to Christmas and to the end of time. That is why on the first Sunday of Advent, "watch Sunday," we typically read from Mark that the Son of Man will come at a time when we don't know so we must stay awake.

Friday's tragedy in Connecticut shakes us all. It breaks our hearts. It seems like an end of the world event. It makes it difficult to celebrate "rejoice" Sunday in Advent. My mind instead goes ahead in the Bible a few weeks to Matthew 2: 16-18 and the Massacre of the Innocents, when Herod decided to have all the children two years and under around Bethlehem, where Jesus had just been born, killed to try and remove the rival who would be born there. Such a massacre of innocents last Friday leaves us looking for answers. For the people of Connecticut last Friday was more than a loss of innocence, it was a loss of future, it was an end of the world event. Some have called it an apocalypse.

This Sunday the lectionary gives us a passage about a coming judgment at the time of an apocalypse. Many of us are thinking about an apocalypse this week anyway. Every paper we pick up tells us we as a nation are about to fall off a fiscal cliff. The *Washington Post* this past Wednesday had an article on the cultural focus on December 12, 2012, 12/12/12, and concerns that the world might end then. Throughout our planet, thousands are preparing for the fateful day of December 21, 2012, when many believe a 5,125-year cycle known as the Long Count in the Mayan calendar supposedly comes to an end on the darkest day of the year and will result in the end of the world. Many TV shows, even this week's episode of the TV show *Glee*, have focused on it. We are halfway between December 12 and 21 now and if there is a year in which the Advent focus on the end of history is particularly poignant it's this one. Christmas preparations make this such a stressful time of year anyway. And now we have to remove ourselves from our stress, shocked to grieve another's loss. It can all seem overwhelming.

And even if we are not concerned about the world's immediate longevity, at some point each of us will go to meet our maker. Whether we meet Jesus in the afterlife or Jesus comes to meet us here we all have some concern about what happens at the end.

Through its imagery of a coming time of judgment, scripture like Luke chapter 3 brings forth ideas of an apocalypse, a word commonly

associated with destruction. In the Bible, the word "apocalypse" really just means, "revelation." Apocalyptic literature is meant to focus not on destruction but on a vision for the people of God, that there might be something that was not seen clearly before and now is seen when revealed at the apocalypse.

The focal point of Biblical apocalyptic literature is often the Book of Revelations, a book which many worry provides frightening visions of the future. But the Book of Revelations as it's commonly called is actually the Revelation to John. A vision revealed to John. Really the entire Bible is an apocalyptic book, a revelation. Through the Bible, God has revealed all sorts of advice and guidance and history and understanding of God's nature.

Most of the visions of the future in the Bible are hopeful, even joyful. Think of the visions we have heard in our calls to worship during these Advent weeks through the lighting of the candles. We read that we "watch for that glorious day that is coming when the nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, and God's love, grace and light shall cover the Earth." We read that we are "preparing ourselves for the days when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." We read this morning that "that the wilderness and dry land shall be glad, the desert shall drink; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and all will rejoice with singing."

These apocalypses, these revelations, these Biblical visions of the future are not of fire breathing dragons but of good things. Visions that "all the peoples of the world will be blessed." Visions of a New Jerusalem. Visions, as John puts it in verse 6 of our lesson today, that "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

One of the most prominent promises God makes in the Bible is to not bring the ultimate punishment as part of the ultimate future. After God nearly wipes out humanity with the flood, God decides to save Noah

and his family and animals and then sets out a rainbow as a reminder to himself not to do that again.

We have lots of questions when something like what happened Friday happens. About where was God? Why does God let it happen? Will people be reunited with loved ones?

Elie Wiesel defined Heaven as "the place where questions and answers become one." To me, the whole purpose of God's revelation in scripture and the Spirit is the slow unfolding of how God makes Godself known to us on the way to Heaven.

We have enough pain and hurt in our world. I do not believe in the afterlife God will do to us what we are already so willing to do to ourselves. I do not believe that is in the nature of God.

The end time, the apocalypse, will be a full revelation of God. At the apocalypse we'll get to see the full nature of God. But I believe the clues the Bible gives us of God are hopeful.

Advent is a special time because it leads to the ultimate revelation of God. Once Jesus arrives at Christmas, we get a glimpse into the deeper nature of God in a way we can understand. We see how compassionate and caring God is.

I do not believe the world will end next week. But I do believe that God will reveal Godself fully to us at some point in some way at some time of God's choosing. And that allows me to live with hope even in the midst of tragedy.

I believe we have a lot to anticipate whenever the end comes for us. It's going to be much better than things are now, not worse. If apocalypse is about revelation, and the God who will meet in death or when Christ comes again is anything like Jesus, then we have nothing to fear. We have everything to look forward to. A God who sent Jesus is ultimately not a God of massacre, devastation and destruction but of salvation and love. Whether we are trapped by yesterday's pain. Whether we meet Jesus tomorrow, next week or if we live another 50 years or more, when Jesus

comes, when the full revelation happens for us I don't think we will be disappointed.

Many a generation in history has looked for the coming age of God's full revelation. The Israelites looked for it in the reign of King David, in the temple, in the return from exile and in the coming of Messiah. In our lesson today, the people all were asking John if he was the one who would bring the end. The followers of Jesus looked for Christ's immediate return. So much so that Paul had to scold the Thessalonians for being "truant," as Paul put it, because they were sitting on the sidelines of life waiting for Jesus to return rather than building up the church as they should have.

In more recent times, people have looked for the second coming of Christ at the end of centuries. A debate occurred a century ago between what were called pre and post millennial dispensationalists about whether Jesus was supposed to return before or after a 1000 years period. The whole Left Behind series of literature revolves around similar assumptions. I spent December of 1999 in Jerusalem and there were a lot of people there believing that Y2K, the end of the millennium, would mean Christ's return at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

And yet Jesus said that no one, not even he, knew the time of the end. That Jesus did not know underscores how closely held that information is and should make us humble in assuming we can figure it out. And Jesus told his followers "Who by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"

Jesus was clear that we are not supposed to be able to figure it out the end time. So we should stop worrying about it and instead we are to focus on the present. And the world needs help. That is the message of John in our passage for today. That we should not obsess about the past or the future, but live in the present and change what we can change. John arrives proclaiming the need for repentance because judgment is coming. But he does so proclaiming that what is coming is good news. Many Jewish people came to John not wanting to change. The Pharisees taught that by reason of God's covenant with Israel, the

Israelites were exempt from judgment. That being ethically Jewish meant that they were already saved and so didn't need to change behavior. John rejected that claim, saying "Do not say 'we have Abraham as an ancestor'" as an excuse. Instead "bear of fruits of repentance."

The second group was those who came to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, both past and future. Many people in John's time looked back to the past and wanted to be protected from the future. Protected regardless of their behavior in the present.

And in either case, whether focused on past or future the people were hoping to avoid making changes in the present. Yet John exhorts them to focus on their ethical living in the present. The masses asked John what they should do and he told them to be generous with what they had, giving to others in need. For us, our Angel Gift Tree gives us an opportunity to act on John's words. When the tax collectors and soldiers asked John what to do he told them to act rightly, not taking more than they should. In each case, John directs the anxious people to the present. And to change what they know needs to be changed.

Our passage ends with John making pronouncements about fire and about good news. The fire seems disconcerting but the fire is connected to the presence of the Holy Spirit. That the Spirit can help change even the most difficult parts of us. Remember that controlled fires are used in the western U.S. to burn parts of forests that have died so they don't cause more damage. An unquenchable fire was one that could handle even the most difficult parts of the plant, the most difficult parts of life, the seemingly unpardonable sins. That would be helpful to tax collector and soldiers, and any of us who think we are beyond saving.

This is why John is able to say at end of our passage that this all is "good news." Good news for people who want to know what they were supposed to do to live morally. Good news for people sad about the past or anxious about the future. Good news that God is interested in sharing news that we would consider good.

For while we can't change the past or control the future we can impact the present. We can influence our attitude today. We can control how we act and react now. We can choose to be mindful and to focus on what is before us now.

We can certainly change what needs to be changed. We as a society can say enough is enough and can develop laws and regulations that restrict access to the most dangerous weapons, and can do more to support mental health.

Read the text to Once in Royal David's City. A baby is born for us, for our tears and needs. To bring us good news. When Christ arrives in a stable at Christmas the angel proclaims that he brings "good news of great joy." On this Sunday when our hearts are heavy, we still light the rose candle, and we rejoice that God has good news for us. Good news of great joy for all people. The word "Gospel" means "good news." The whole revelation of God in scripture is good news. For in the long term, God wins. God completes what God started. God triumphs over evil. Whether Jesus returns tomorrow or in 10000 years, whether the earth as we know it ends in a dramatic or common way, we know that Jesus has promised to return. We are not left on our own forever. And we know that the heart of the Bible is the Gospel, that Jesus gives us a deeper glimpse of God's nature. And it's good news. Its love.

I believe once we experience God at the final revelation, we will experience that love even more fully. That will happen in God's time, not ours. Whether we are afflicted by yesterday's pain or whether we worry about the future, there is a time coming that will ease our pain and answer our questions.

And if there is any thought that can allow us to live with peace, even joy, in the present, it's knowing that a tomorrow is coming that will be brighter than we can possibly imagine. May it be so. Amen.