

“Apocalyptic Joy: Is there such a thing?”

Proper 28C (November 17, 2019)

Scriptures: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-11, 18-19; Revelation 7:9-10

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone's shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

One theme that emerges from today's scripture readings is that the things that seem impossible are possible. Which reminds me of a recent *New York Times* story titled “An Improbable Relic of Auschwitz: a Shofar that Defied the Nazis.”¹ The shofar, as you may know, is a ram's horn “traditionally blown by Jews to welcome the High Holy Days.” Our friends from Tikkun v'Or blew the shofar in this space when they celebrated their High Holy Days here a few weeks ago. One commentator put the importance of the shofar in Judaism this way: “If there's an artifact that symbolizes the Jewish soul, you'd be hard-pressed to find something more indicative than a shofar.” The shofar “evoke[s] Abraham's sacrifice of a ram in place of his son Isaac [in the book of Genesis], [its sound recalls] the summoning of the Israelites to Sinai for Moses' giving of the law [in the book of Exodus], and [its long wail speaks to] the most fervent expression of Jewish hope [which is found in the Passover Seder phrase:] ‘next year in Jerusalem.’”

The *Times* story about the impossible becoming possible, reports on how shofars were blown by Jews held in Nazi concentration camps. “Dr. Judith ... Schwartz, an expert on the Holocaust, says her father [Chaskel] ... a longtime prisoner ... [at] Auschwitz ... was given [a] shofar for safekeeping in 1945 by a fellow prisoner as the Nazis emptied the camp and fled the advancing Russians. ... Dr. Schwartz said ... [her father's shofar provides] evidence of the lengths to which imprisoned Jews went to practice their religion in [the camps]. [Jews in the camps, she said,] mouth[ed] ... blessings during beatings and ... trad[ed] away ... bread rations during Passover when leavened products [were] forbidden. [And they used] abandoned oil drums at Auschwitz, ... in place of traditional huts for contemplation during the harvest festival of Sukkot. ...” Mouthing blessings, trading bread rations, slipping into abandoned oil drums - these could all be done clandestinely. But Holocaust scholars know from “a number of eyewitness testimonies that shofars were [also] blown [in the camps].” How Jews managed “to sound these horns, ... with [their long] ... wails and staccato blasts, without putting themselves in immediate mortal danger” has only recently come to light. Dr. Schwartz's father, Chaskel, was in charge of work details at Auschwitz. On Rosh Hashana 1944, he “contrived ... to send fellow prisoners on a distant [work] detail where they might safely, and privately, pray.” While out on their detail, the prisoners blew a shofar they'd smuggled out with them.

Chaskel's shofar was given to him in January of 1945 by a fellow prisoner. “The night before [the Russians liberated Auschwitz], ... another prisoner [approached Chaskel] ... and pressed on him a rag-wrapped object.” The fellow prisoner, who gave it to him, believed he would die as the Jews were forced to march out of the camp, saying to Chaskel as he gave him the rag-wrapped object, “I'm going to die on this march. If you live, take this shofar. Tell them we blew the shofar at Auschwitz.”

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/arts/auschwitz-shofar.html>

Dr. Schwartz's father Chaskel "survived the march" from Auschwitz, and he went to Israel after the war. "Off the coast of Haifa on Rosh Hashana 1945, he blew th[at] shofar." "If it's one thing I know from all the thousands of survivors I interviewed," Dr. Schwartz said ... , "it's that the impossible was possible both to the bad and the good."

Dr. Schwartz's words about the impossible becoming possible, both the bad and the good, have a timeless quality to them. They certainly apply to the horrors of Auschwitz. But they're also relevant today. Our schools are supposed to be safe spaces for our precious children. Thursday's high school shooting in Santa Clarita, CA reminded us again that in modern America we cannot assume that our children will always be safe in school. I'm a parent. No parent, when they drop their children off in the morning, should have to wonder: is this the last time I'm going to see them? "But this is America," sang pop star Childish Gambino. "This is America," there are "guns in my area"² - in schools and in houses of worship. The impossible is possible. Words that also apply to the Impeachment Hearings. Can you believe this is where we're at as a country? Split directly down the middle, living in two completely different realities.

Each of today's scripture readings are drawn from a genre of ancient literature called "apocalyptic" - a genre of literature that tries to explain how the impossible becomes possible. When we hear the word "apocalyptic" today we tend to think of the end of the world - depicted so graphically in Hollywood films like *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Mad Max*, *Wall-E*, *World War Z*, *The Matrix*, *12 Monkeys* and a host of others. But the word "apocalyptic" comes from a Greek word that means something more subtle than merely the end of the world. The Greek word means "unveiling" or "revelation." The New Testament Book of Revelation is actually titled in Greek "the Apocalypse." Jews and Christians in the ancient world wrote many apocalyptic texts - only a few of which are preserved in our Bible in portions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, sections of the gospels and the letters of Paul, and, of course, in the Book of Revelation. All of these biblical texts and books are "apocalyptic" - revelatory literature, unveiling literature. Literature that peeks behind the wizard's curtain - to borrow an image from *The Wizard of Oz* - peeks behind the curtain to catch a glimpse of what's really going on. A God's-eye view.

Jews and Christians wrote many apocalypses in antiquity. In addition to the ones in the Bible, early Christians wrote The Apocalypse of Paul, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Apocalypse of James, and several others; and Jews and Christians wrote and edited The Sibylline Oracles, Fourth Enoch, Second and Third Baruch, and many more. Apocalyptic is its own library in antiquity. And all of this rich literature was produced in the fires of upheaval, social pressure, persecution. To make sense of the impossible becoming possible - of foreign armies destroying their holy places, of their people being exiled or martyred, ancient Jews and Christians, with vivid imaginations, turned to symbols to make sense of their world. In his landmark study, Yale scholar John Collins wrote that apocalyptic language "is ... symbolic rather than factual."³ The Book of Revelation speaks of angels and beasts and dragons and bowls of wrath and harps of praise and seas of glass; it depicts riders on white horses and bottomless pits and strange locusts with human faces and long hair. It's artistic language - the language of imagination; language that turns to the world of art to graphically depict one of the deepest of human longings: the longing for explanation. Why

² Watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>

³ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998 [1984]), 17.

has this happened? Why has the temple been destroyed? Why have the people been exiled? Why suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why such political corruption in our day? Why school shootings? Why cancer? Why has the impossible become possible?

In a recent article titled “Fire and Brimstone,” Reverend Rachel Hackenberg wrestled with some of these questions.⁴ “Maybe you’ve noticed,” she writes, “that there are [people] weeping in the streets because their [family members] have been taken from them - by immigration officials, by gun violence, by war. Maybe you’ve noticed that there are people raging around the world because the systems that should support them have undermined their lives - governments spend money more readily on teargas than on education, corporations prioritize profit over community, religions love orthodoxy more than understanding. Maybe you’ve ... [been] wondering ‘how long? - how long will hearts bleed, how long will discouragement weigh down souls, how long until hope is realized. But still wars are waged and walls are built. Still wealth inequality skyrockets and gun sales surge. Fire and brimstone [from the Book of Revelation] aren’t raining down to engulf AK-47s. Coals are not being stoked by the breath of God to incinerate white nationalism. ... One of the most essential classes of my seminary years,” she continues, “focused on the problem of theodicy - the question of whether God can be good when evil still exists. ... The answers ... were complicated and sometimes discouraging. ... But finding answers wasn’t really the point. The point was to do the work of seeking them: to gaze honestly at trauma and evil, to look hard for hope, and to dig deep for love and life.”

When we look at today’s scripture readings, I think we see this same process at work - this same process of realizing that answers are complicated, that finding answers isn’t really the point, but that the life of faith means looking hard for hope and digging deeply for love and life - looking for the possible in the midst of the impossible. Jesus, in today’s gospel reading, is portrayed as an apocalypticist, predicting the destruction of sacred spaces, and warning about hucksters with messianic complexes who claim to be the sole origin of truth, leading multitudes astray, and warning about increases in violence as factions and interest groups within societies grapple with where their countries should go next. Jesus encourages his followers to endure, to persevere in faith - a faith that sometimes gropes in the dark without every question being answered, but a faith that persists - a faith that says, “no matter how difficult life circumstances get, I trust that God is present and still at work, moving and flowing in ways I cannot always explain.” Sometimes it’s only in hindsight that we look back and say, “I can’t explain how I got through that period in my life. I think it must have been God.”

But apocalyptic does more than simply energize faith. Apocalypticists use symbolic language to also give hope and even joy to readers. It’s one of the paradoxes of this literature: it uses dark, end-of-the-world-type language - language you might encounter in some lyrics from heavy metal bands - and yet piercing through this darkness - and this is true across the apocalyptic genre - piercing through the gloom are shafts of light, shafts of hope and joy. Today’s reading from Isaiah is such a beam of light. It offers a glimpse of what God is up to in our world - a peek behind the curtain. It’s an apocalyptic text that uses imaginative language to lay out God’s plan, God’s dream for the world. Isaiah speaks of God laboring to create a new heavens and a new earth - an existence without weeping or pain, where there’s security and blessing, where all of creation lives into God’s vision of peace: the world’s wolves and lambs will dwell together in peace, says Isaiah. This is the kind of

⁴ <https://rachelhackenberg.com/category/theodicy/>

world God dreams for us to live in - the world God hopes for; the world God's spirit is moving to create. We have a saying in the UCC: "No single statement fully expresses who God is, but where there is justice and peace and compassion we see the living God at work in history. To such a God we belong." Isaiah invites readers to get on board with God's dream. To work with God in making a new world; in wiping away tears and filling people with joy and living in peace and letting the divine light of healing and hope shine through us into life's darkest corners. It's an invitation to allow ourselves to believe that the things that *seem* impossible - like blowing the shofar in Auschwitz - *are* possible with God.

...In her book *When Spiritual But Not Religious is Not Enough*, Reverend Lillian Daniel shares a story about her parents experiencing a taste of God's dream in church after they had divorced when she was a child.⁵ Her father had never been keen on the Episcopal church her mother insisted they attend, but after the divorce, her father "officially joined an Episcopal church in downtown Washington, D.C. ... - a cavernous, dark Gothic church with ... gold leaf paint and extravagant stained glass ... , known for its high and formal liturgy, as well as its serious work with the homeless." At his church, Daniel's father met a new life partner, "who shared ... his passion for writing ... [and] his love of their common little church. ... At that little church," writes Daniel, "having once been lost, it seemed that now [my father] was found. And at my mother's new church ... ," she continues, "she found the lively friends and fellow adventurers who would accompany her on her journey into newly single life. I loved attending worship at my mother's extravagant church, where red wine was sold at a cash bar at all the catered church suppers, and champagne was served at Easter communion. On one famous Sunday the avant-garde priests rode into the sanctuary on motorcycles, and to this day I can't remember the theological reason, because after seeing something like that, who would? But I also loved my mother's new church because it was in its basement that my father discovered his favorite Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, and made another profound and life-saving connection." After wrestling with the "why" question: why did my parents separate? Daniel found herself focusing more on what God had been up to in their lives since, writing, "I realize [now] that we human beings spend our lives in a trial separation from one another. We think we have these divisions, disagreements, past grievances, divorces, class differences, and separate paths in life, and to us they feel profoundly real. But in the meantime, [God's spirit] keeps knitting us back together, miraculously often through the church, reminding us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not even one another."

....God's hand is at work, of course, to preserve marriages and relationships too. But Rev. Daniel's story seems to me to be a story of hope and renewed joy after pain - like blowing the shofar off the coast of Haifa on Rosh Hashana 1945. A story about God doing what God does best: drawing light and life from shadows. Amen.

⁵ Lillian Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 210-215.