

Ode to Socks
Palisades Presbyterian Church
August 6, 2006
Jenna Tiitsman

Psalm 51:1-2; 15-17; John 6:24-37

Apparently, we are standing at the eve of the apocalypse. And you thought it was just a normal August Sunday. Well, you heard it here first. If you hadn't already heard it from Senator Rick Santorum or the Left Behind books, factions of the pro-Israel lobby, or, my personal favorite, RaptureReady.com, where you can find a daily mathematical assessment of the approach of the rapture, when the righteous will be whisked off to heaven before the warfare of Armageddon comes to earth. In its own words, the "Dow Jones industrial average of the end times." We gain points for increase in warfare, the appearance of false Christs, rising liberalism and recently 3 points in the category called Mark of the Beast because of the compromises required to pass the extension of the U.S. Patriot Act. The current score is 158. Anything over 145 means, on their scale of Armageddon's approach, "fasten your seatbelts."

I do. Because after reading some of the biblical interpretations they include, I strongly suspect that I will be left behind when the righteous are suddenly whisked up to heaven. Thankfully, there is a helpful article intended to be read by those still sadly on earth post-rapture. If you are interested, you can find it on the website—it is called "Oops, I Guess I Wasn't Ready." After patiently explaining where much of the earth's population has suddenly disappeared to, the article's author firmly informs the post-rapture reader that "you have been left behind because you have left [God] with no choice but to leave you behind." All is not lost, however. Should any of us miss the rapture, there is still hope. Well, for most. The author does mention that you can be eternally lost if you receive the Mark of the Beast on your right hand or forehead. But, barring that, all you need to do is have all your sins removed. This is to "prevent heaven from becoming contaminated with sin particles." Apparently, our mothers were theologically right—cleanliness is literally next to godliness. There is only one way, according to the web site, to have your sins removed. "The only industrial strength cleanser strong enough to thoroughly remove sin stains is the blood of Jesus Christ." Not, after all, those little bottles of anti-bacterial gel.

Now, clearly, armageddon obsession is where I usually locate Christianity's comic side, but recently my laughter has been noticeably nervous. Marks of the beast and scrubbing-Bubbles Jesus aside, in the last few weeks, the idea of an impending apocalypse makes sense. The violence exploding between Israel and Lebanon seems epic, monumental. And it finds echo in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and then, Congo, Darfur, New Orleans. It does not help that the heat, somewhat hellish itself, is an unmistakable sign of global warming. That there was a tornado in Westchester. That horrific acts of which humanity should be incapable, like torture, like sustaining poverty, like trafficking in human beings all seem suddenly to be on the rise. As if, indeed, the whole of life were coming to some sort of terrible head.

And, like the dispensationalists, I almost want it to. To finally stop this desperate game of trying to outrun old wrongs, heal from past wounds that insist on opening again and again, rid ourselves of all the persistent ways we self-destruct. To be, once and for all, clean from our own sin. To wipe off of our souls each misdeed, each propensity for uncaring, that so insidiously tend to sneak up and overtake our good intentions. To wipe off our global soul each violent attack for which someone then felt compelled to retaliate. To wipe off each retaliation that invited further violence. To cut off the weighty memories of damage that drag on our shoulders, on the shoulders of whole cities, whole nations, whole religious communities. To end the battles over righteousness by getting a final, authoritarian word on the matter. The joyful flood of divine cleansing would pour over all who say yes. Each of us, the world itself could be wiped clean, purged of our sin. Blank slate. Purified. Ready, finally, to receive God. And then God would come with signs so big they are unmistakable. Horsemen and trumpets. Fireworks. Now is a time that calls for huge revelation- God's presence in its most awesome, its most magnificent and terrible and majestic, to end iniquity in a crash of cymbals and the roar of final thunder.

This is what the psalmist cries out for: *Blot out my transgressions. Erase them. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin.* Not just the little misdeeds of the everyday. But also, original sin. You may know original sin as this idea of Augustine's that twists down through history from that first eden fruit, passed genetically from mother to child. But think perhaps of original sin as the sin we are born into. The institutions that we did not cause or want but that we unwittingly participate in. The cycles of violence. Economic injustice that fuels our privilege. Paying taxes that go to welfare and social security...and ship the machinery of war around the world. The very racism that has become so ingrained an institution that even the meaning of the line "I shall be whiter than snow" becomes its own sin, invoking centuries of thinking that makes whiteness pure and darkness a stain. We don't mean these things but there they are and we at work in them—our original sin. Indeed, says the psalmist, "I was born guilty." Cleanse us of this too, Oh God.

The psalmist becomes almost frantic—purge me with hyssop, anything, do anything to purify me. Don't even look at me until I am made clean. Then, we would be ready to receive your bounty. To do your work. So, yes, bring the apocalypse; come in great smashes of holy brilliance. And we will finally be purified into the kind of person—the kind of Christian, the kind of parent or child or friend or lover or neighbor that we mean to be. That we want to be. And then, oh God, we could give that to you.

But God stops the psalmist gently, asking for only one thing. It is not the cleansed and spotless soul. It is not the sinless person. It is not purity or perfection or even the most perfect sacrifice. No. God wants none of these. *"The only sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit."* The fragile and stumbling heart. The very thing we so desperately hide from divine sight. God simply asks for this broken world and us, its broken beings.

The ache for an apocalypse suddenly seems much like the desperate people we meet in John, who want so much to follow Jesus that they search the shore. When they do not find him, they look to sea. They climb into boats and row furiously to Capernaum, looking for him. And when they find him, they beg “Let us do God’s work... Just show us the sign.” I imagine Jesus looked at them blankly. “The sign,” they say, “the work you will perform.” And then, perhaps as a helpful example, they remind Jesus of the sign of Moses: “our ancestors ate manna from heaven.” These men and women were so ready for strange food to fly from the sky at any second that they had missed the bread in their own hands. They were so busy looking up, that they missed Jesus standing before them. “God gives the bread from heaven to you,” he explains. And the crowd, ravenous for this bread, aching for the moment of revelation, pushes him, “Yes, yes, give us this bread always.” Jesus looks again at this crowd, this crowd of thousands whom just two nights before he had fed fully with only 5 loaves, this forgetful crowd peering at the horizon for the manna that would surely come flying forward. “I am the bread of life,” he says. You have already been given all you need, he says. And then, maybe thinking of those who in the secret corners of their hearts feel, like the psalmist that they are not good enough, he says “I will not turn anyone away.”

On RaptureReady.com, there is a detailed description of the glorious scenes in heaven that will meet the righteous and a long list of the terrible things that will happen to those left behind. The apocalypse is risky business—and Armageddon, with its plagues, hailstorms, earthquakes, stretches our imagination of the horrific. But I find Jesus’ words of the given gift and open acceptance of us much more terrifying: All we need for salvation is already in our hands. No one who asks will be turned away. God longs only for us just as we are. This is it.

The Awesome God of terrible, magnificent immensity seems somehow easier to hold than this open gift. How even more terrifying to know that this gift has already been given. Those of us who wanted time to prepare, wanted to clean house, to be just a little more secure in our belief before appearing in front of God look away from the horizon of the promised splendor and find God standing before us, placing the Bread of Life gently in our hands. In these shaking, imperfect hands. I worry that we might just break under the weight of this simplicity.

A man in Chile was once given a pair of socks. They were knit for him by one of the older women in his town. They were bright blue. They had a garish golden stripe across the foot. This man was a poet, so he did what he could, he wrote an ode to these bright blue socks. And when Pablo Neruda began to look carefully at the given gift, he understood it to beautiful. READ He was tempted but instead he put them on.

When we hear of another bomb in Lebanon, another rocket in Israel, another effect of neglect in the long wake of Katrina, when we feel the earth warm beyond sustainability, the river jumping out at us in protest, when we hear the lamentation that rises up from this earth...and we look to the far horizon for the approach of the apocalypse. When we are frozen by our own fear that we will fail, that we will make the same mistakes, fall into the same self-destruction, the same broken relationships and we look to heaven for the

rush of wings that will signal the Final Revelation. We are taking the given gift that was already placed in our hands and putting it in the golden cage of grandeur. We are taking grace, humble socks, and finding our feet unworthy to the task of wearing them, putting it behind glass. We are taking salvation, given as bread, and think ourselves too broken to eat. Friends, the bread was broken so that we would know there is nourishment in the fragments. This broken bread is the bread of life meant to be eaten by broken beings. But we are waiting for the apocalypse.

Apocalypse, *apo kalupsis*, means unveiling. It means: take off the cover of gilded majesty to find the given, broken bread. It means take off the cover of shame to find that you are already loved. It means turn your sight from the horizon to the salvation that sits in the very palm of your hands, to the God that lives in your very heart. And suddenly know that your hands are able to hold this blessed weight, to do the work, to love with that fierce grace that will show the heaven we long for to be very close. The kingdom of God is at hand.