

Sermon for Advent 2. Church of the Abiding Presence, Gettysburg, PA, on December 13, 2017.

2 Peter 3:8-15a Preached by Gilson Waldkoenig

This morning when I walked to school, it was 19 degrees and there was a biting west wind in my face. The first real taste of winter this year. I checked and at Mount Airy it was only 22 degrees. I thought, well it is a strange day to hear the Second Letter of Peter predict that the elements of the earth will melt with fire (v12 and v10 and back in v7).

It's also one of those days when "warming" doesn't seem to be the accurate word for climate change, at least not where we are. And yet, this morning I read that *Utqiagvik* (Ut-kar-a-vik) Alaska, which used to be called Barrow Alaska, which is the northernmost settlement in the US, on the edge of the Arctic Sea, the average temperatures climbed almost 8 degrees since 2000, and jumped 6.9 in November and 4.7 thus far in December. [[There is a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Observatory there.](#)]

No wonder 195 nations met this week in Paris, two years after the historic COP21 brought 196 nations together in a commitment to address climate change by curbing the dumping of carbon pollution into the atmosphere. Yes, it was 195 nations this week. One was missing. One nation whose president and a bunch of administrators and lawmakers prefer to deny human culpability for atmospheric carbon overload because they still make a lot of money from fossil fuels. And some Christians join them, saying that it's up to God when the world would end, not humans.

Well the Second Letter of Peter offered its own version of an apocalyptic future, saying that the heavens and earth were reserved for fire (that was in v7 before our appointed reading). Hmm that's interesting. I don't think we have to be afraid to say that the imagery in the Second Letter of Peter is speculative. It is not literally true.... unless it would be! We just don't know yet, because the future has not yet come. And that's OK.

The point of the apocalyptic imagery in Second Peter is not to predict literal details about the future. Likewise, it is not the point to predict the future with climate data. Both Second Peter and we today have to deal with the in-between time. Between now and any projected apocalypse. For my part, I don't care if you literally believe that Miami will go into the ocean and millions of people will move to Orlando. What I do want is for all of us to take the possibility seriously enough to improve our care for God's earth and our care for people. We have to begin again now to be ready to house and feed people. These days are the very worst time to attack and dismantle refugee and immigrant services, for instance. The propaganda says it is about outsiders, people we don't know and don't want to know. The climate data suggests a different possibility. It is us. It is my family and yours. We are all potential refugees and migrants under the burning skies and melting elements.

2<sup>nd</sup> Peter and we modern people are getting closer together. The writer poses the question, 'How shall we live in the meantime' when we expect some level of apocalypse. "What sorts of persons ought you to be," Second Peter asks.

The central question is what should we be doing and saying while we wait for a future we cannot know with certainty ahead of time, but we can frame in some plausible ways.

I'd like to suggest the word "frame" for theological use. The scriptures present frames to view the world, to view ourselves, and to hear some pertinent things about God. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Pete, in our reading today, we're

looking through a frame of apocalypse. If that fame is up, and the future could be scary, then it sharpens the question of what should we do and say in the meantime. Similarly, the frame of climate data is up and poses a scary future. The in-between question comes into sharp focus. How are we going to sound, and how are we going to act, if a threatening future is ahead?

Martin Luther taught us to search scripture for two frames: one of judgment and one of promise. When we tally the consequences of our mistakes and sins, the frame for our future is not hopeful, unless there is promise from God that the intervention called the cross of Jesus Christ turns death around into life, and offers forgiveness and justification where there could have been only condemnation and separation from God.

For me, a key part of being Lutheran is that I look for the two frames in scripture. In turn, I can accept different kinds of imagery and all sorts of variations in different parts of scripture and different traditions with their different voices, because I'm still finding the two big frames. Judgment and forgiveness. The law and Christ.

And then there are other frames outside of scripture which corroborate the two frames in scripture. When we look at the serious data about the atmosphere, it is clear that there is too much carbon up there. It's from prehistoric forests that decayed and fossilized long ago, and that we've been burning intensively. But even if you like to deny human culpability, it's still up there with its threatening apocalypse. The atmosphere, which gives us life, is now threatening to undo us. That is a crushing law. It is a frame of law and judgment upon us no matter how you might squirm out from under uncomfortable conclusions about human culpability and whether a good God would allow such nastiness. You can cry "It's not our fault" all you want—you can cry, Oh God wouldn't allow that—all through the Bible people try that over and over. It never worked yet. The frame of judgment still hangs there in front of us, and we can't peer into the future two seconds without that frame around whatever we see.

On this seminary ridge 154 years ago, a horrible battle brought destruction and suffering. Some saw it in a frame of judgment, recompense. The grievance of the south was that if slavery ended, some people would lose a fortune. The rude, uncomfortable fact is that white supremacists in the south, and sympathizers in the north, believed that slaves were property. To end slavery would be to rob—yes, that's what they believed—to rob the so-called owners of a great deal of "their" wealth. Their dream was to expand slavery into the west, and thus have more opportunity to expand holdings.

Today we're coming up to another potential transfer of wealth. In a brilliant article in the Atlantic entitled "[The New Abolitionism](#)," Chris Hayes wrote that "averting planetary disaster will mean forcing fossil fuel companies to give up at least \$10 trillion in wealth." The last time there was such a major transfer of wealth—or potential transfer—was at the Civil War. If we are living in a time of "New Abolitionism," then there's another frame to corroborate the frame of judgment, or at least tribulation. Because the changeover is going to be very, very difficult to say the least.

But "New Abolitionism" is also a frame of hope. The hope of cleaner fuels is a frame of hope. And even just a little bit of mitigation of the carbon overload in the atmosphere is a frame of hope. To hope for a better world, a cleaner atmosphere, is not the gospel in and of itself. But it rhymes. It sings with the gospel—it harmonizes with the gospel and perhaps thereby complements it. A frame of hope for the

world corroborates the frame of forgiveness and justification we also can find in scripture. It's a similar sign. That's worth waiting for.

Next semester, United Lutheran Seminary students are going to replant seminary gardens. The one on Seminary Ridge in Gettysburg, and the one at Mt. Airy in Philadelphia. There are lots of good reasons to do that. One is to produce fresh food to share with others, and for a better diet. That is, if you haven't already moved to locusts and honey exclusively. Another good reason to replant our seminary gardens is to revisit and practice good work. The good work of cultivation, husbandry, farming. Good work of caring for God's earth while we care for others and ourselves. Maybe too we're staying in shape for any apocalypse that could come sooner or later. But be that as it may, when good things come up from the gardens at Seminary Ridge and Mount Airy, they will be signs that corroborate the hope we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Maybe new heavens and a new earth aren't so far off. Second Pete, in this same passage with apocalyptic imagery, Second Pete also declares there will be "new heavens and a new earth." So there's another frame for the future. If we are forgiven by God through Jesus Christ, is it not a new set of heavens for us? If the soil gets healthy from our care for it, and it sequesters more carbon, and the poor and hungry come together at table, is it not a new earth?

New heavens and a new earth. That's something we're waiting for, but sometimes beginning to see. Christ has already come and on the cross accomplished all we need for forgiveness and justification. That's the frame of forgiveness. The new heavens and new earth corroborate that. So why wait? Why not start lifting the signs and words that proclaim the frame of forgiveness and the new heavens and new earth? Why not next semester, digging and planting on Seminary Ridge and Mount Airy, and beyond, in every church yard?

Why wait to start, even while we wait for the fullness of new heavens and new earth? Why not gather at the table of the Lord now, with the word of Christ's death and resurrection ringing in the air as we hear the story again that Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. When we speak the sacrament and share the sacrament, we literally change the climate, albeit one breath at a time. Why wait? Begin to live right now in the newness of God's renewing heavens and earth. Breathe in God's atmosphere; repent again like John recommended. Turn back to the wilderness and trust the Lord. Our very life is borrowed from God's sky and God's ground, and God intends good through it, while we wait, and in the end. Christ assures us of that.

We don't have to deny the climate information to gain a hopeful view of the future God has for us. We live in between the two frames, judgment and forgiveness. But the frame of God's forgiveness, the new heavens and new earth, is the final one. To guide us between the frames we can use the words of 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter verse 15a, "we regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." We regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. Happy Advent. Amen.