

# **Good News or End Times: An Examination of Eschatology**

A Dialogue Sermon between the Rev. Dr. Steven Epperson and Joe Cherry, Ministerial Intern

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## **Eschatology, Steven, Part 1**

In June 1976, the city of Vancouver was the site of the Third Session of the World Urban Habitat Forum sponsored by the United Nations. It was big deal. 15,000 people from around the world registered and participated in the discussions, workshops and events of Habitat. It involved governments, local authorities, civil society, nongovernmental groups and experts in every sphere of urban life. Some of those Habitat participants may be sitting in this Sanctuary today.

One person who showed up in Vancouver for Habitat was Thomas Banyacya, a tribal elder of the Hopi people of Southwest United States. He carried an extraordinary message from his tribe; I'm only going to quote a brief passage from a speech he gave one early June morning in Vancouver:

“According to many prophecies “purification” is near,” he said. “It is my sacred duty to relate this message...Hopi and other Native spiritual leaders are greatly concerned with the conditions of Mother Earth and her children...They have watched the white brothers systematically destroy the Native people as they did natural resources...the Hopi know that greed, pollution and the lack of understanding of nature are about to destroy Mother Earth... According to our beliefs and prophecies if this destruction continues, man’s existence on this world will soon be ended.”

Today, Joe and I are going to talk about a kind of worldview, a sensibility and belief that focuses on the times ahead of us. It’s not the kind of time reckoned simply by sunrise/sunset, or one calendar year succeeding another, or what next year’s fall fashion season has in store.

Rather, it’s a kind of human attentiveness to a larger, mythical canvas about last things, final things—the kind referred to by that Hopi elder and prophet—that, and the consequences of this way of looking at things for the here-and-now. The theological term is *eschatology*—a general

term for teachings and beliefs concerning the end of the world, and the processes of salvation that include death, judgment, the afterlife, and a longed for future golden era of peace on Earth that Christians call the millennium.

If this seems a little foreign to you, picture in your mind, or think about the following: what do disaster movies like *Dr Strangelove*, *The War of the Worlds*, *2012*, and *The Day After* have in common? What connects the 19<sup>th</sup> century Taiping rebellion in China, the Peasants War in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and Karl Marx's end-of-history communist utopia? What links Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, the *million words* written by Sir Isaac Newton interpreting the New Testament's *Book of Revelation*, the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, and jokes about meeting St Peter at "the pearly gates?" What drove George de Bennville, James Rely, John Murray and Hosea Ballou to repudiate the doctrine of hell and preach universal salvation instead? Last year a Canadian journalist writes a best seller about religion and politics in the Harper government and calls it *The Armageddon Factor*. The Arma—what? How is it connected with the eleven novels in the "Left Behind" series that have sold 55 million copies in North America and a thirty volume spin off for teen readers called *Left Behind: the Kids*, in which four teenagers are left behind after the Rapture and band together to fight Satan's forces. I kid you not.

Whenever and wherever human beings have been haunted by death and the prospect of hell and heaven, or crushed under the grinding boot of oppression, or mocked for their beliefs; whenever history just doesn't make sense anymore, when the times are out of joint, when mushroom clouds loom on the horizon, or the fate of nature is perceived as hanging by a thread—there you find eschatological, end time, Kingdom of God, tipping point, gallows humour, messianic, millennial thinking, writing, believing, politicking, and art making. The

world is and has been awash in it; but it seems we don't swim in those waters much, or we don't like to admit it publicly. And aside from the rhetoric of environmentalism, eschatology isn't something Unitarians think or talk about. We're more likely to echo Emerson's words, when he said: "Five minutes today are worth as much to me, as five minutes in the millennium. Let us be poised and wise, and our own, *today*."

But recently, a Unitarian Universalist theologian named Rebecca Ann Parker has taken a closer look at eschatology. And Joe has some interesting things to say about it....

## **Eschatology, Joe, Part 1**

In Minneapolis, at General Assembly and a student breakfast hosted by the UUMA, a member of the UUMA Executive pointed her finger at me and very dramatically asked "Can you define your theology in three words?" I worried that this was some hazing ritual. After she said that she was only kidding I still felt the call to rise to her challenge, and so I answered her: "There's always hope."

Now 'there's always hope' isn't likely to go down in history as one of the great theological statements of all time, but I'm sticking with it. Hope isn't always easy. In fact, hope is sort of a hard place to stay in. Life can really kick you around, and being hopeful means being vulnerable to disappointment.

In her essay, "The Holy Ground," contemporary theologian Rebecca Ann Parker explored the issue of place of hope in liberal theology as part of her analysis of three eschatologies: Social Gospel, Universalist and, Radically Realized.

Having studied Jane Addams and her intersection with the Chautauqua Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, I was pretty familiar with the Social Gospel eschatology. Parker sums this up "We [the practitioners of the Social Gospel] are here to build the kingdom of God on earth."<sup>1</sup>

Universalist eschatology was something that came naturally to me as a child. I rejected

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Hell by second grade because to me, the messages that ‘God is Love’ and ‘God allows eternal punishment’ did not seem to go together. I didn’t know the Bible, and I didn’t know about Hosea Ballou, but eternal punishment seemed cruel and didn’t allow a person a chance for redemption or hope. “God intends all souls to be saved,” Parker identifies as the Universalist eschatology.

Radically Realized eschatology on some level marries the two aforementioned eschatologies. For me it is what has been missing in our Unitarian Universalist understanding about the world around us. Yes, we are responsible for creating God’s Kingdom on earth by working to alleviate suffering and injustice around us. Yes, God’s love is transformative, redemptive and available to all souls. But also, as Parker states, we are still in the Garden of Eden. This is Paradise, and we need to also focus energies on helping ourselves and others realize that this world contains not only suffering, but beauty. Great beauty surrounds us, we need only to learn to see it.

There is beauty and there is pain. There are flowers that bloom in the sunshine, and there are places where the garden needs tending. As people of faith one of our roles is to observe the world, tending it where it needs to be tended, admiring it where it is appropriate and being deeply grateful for being here at all.

Hope isn’t always an easy stance to keep in this life. It is complex and often leaves you open to profound disappointment. There are those who may even say that I have been expelled from the metaphorical Garden of Eden by people who have worked to marginalize me based on my birth defect, my sexuality, my working class background and by my half-and-half racial make-up of bi-raciality. It would be easy to imagine that I’ve been oppressed and shoved out of the Garden’s flower patch, vegetable area and out onto the lawn. But in reality, the lawn is part of the garden, and there is unique beauty to be explored there, too.

Do you feel like people have tried to remove you from a place because you didn’t act, look, feel or seem like “one of them”? It’s could’ve been when we you were young, when maybe your older cousins didn’t want to include you at family gatherings. It could’ve been at work where maybe your methodologies were new and untried, or you yourself were new to the profession. It doesn’t take much to feel like an outsider, and it takes even less when there are people around you who are hinting that you’re not part of the “in” crowd.

And, brave face on it or not, that hurts us.

When we are hurt, or when we are confused, if we can have an eschatology to help guide our thoughts and help us to deal with our situation, that can be helpful. Look to the front of your orders of service. Let me be clear about this: I am not suggesting that Lucy has the eschatology that you should adopt!

In Bahá'í eschatology creation does not have a beginning nor end. Instead the eschatology of other religions is viewed as symbolic.

The Brahma Kumaris believe that the old world will come to an end, at the end of the cycle, through extensive destructive events which will wipe out the whole population of the old world. The end of the cycle is referred to as "the end". At the end of the old cycle, a new cycle begins.

Christian eschatology is concerned with death, an intermediate state, Heaven, hell, the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, a rapture, a great tribulation, the Millennium, end of the world, the last judgment, a new heaven and a new earth

Contemporary Hindu eschatology is linked in the Vaishnavite tradition to the figure of Kalki, or the tenth and last avatar of Vishnu before the age draws to a close, and Shiva simultaneously dissolves and regenerates the universe.

Islamic eschatology is documented in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, regarding the Signs of the Day of Judgment. The Prophet's sayings on the subject have been traditionally divided into Major and Minor Signs. When these signs come to pass, the Day of Judgement is here.

Zoroastrian eschatology says at the end of time there will be a great battle between good and evil, which good will win.

With so many eschatologies to choose from, which is the right one for you?

Oh, would that I had some sort of magical "eschatometer" to tell you. That you'll have to figure out on your own, and it's going to take some work. In fact the only way you're going to find a valuable system of beliefs is if you spend time with yourself thinking about what's of ultimate value to you.

## **Eschatology, Steven Part 2.**

Several weeks ago, Joe and I talked about Parker's essay and her analysis of these three kinds of eschatology. What really stood out for me, especially in her advocacy for a "radically realized eschatology" were the statements that we are still in the Garden of Eden; that this is Paradise; and that great beauty surrounds us, if we only had eyes to see it. My response to those statements...? Well let me put it this way. One Sunday morning some time ago, Diana and I were listening to a Unitarian minister preaching eloquently about the holy now and beauty in the world, when she leaned over and whispered to me: "only someone with central heat and air conditioning would say that." It's not that Parker's statements about Paradise and the Garden are flat-out wrong; I just find them wanting in serious reflection about the darker side of nature and human history.

Looking back, it seems, by my lights, that beauty's taken quite a beating, and that baldly stating that we are in the Garden of Eden just doesn't cut it. The 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the present century have been grim teachers. World Wars, totalitarian regimes, the gulags, the camps, genocide, residential schools, our chronic inability to adequately feed and house our own people, the spectre of global warming, the daily onslaught of media, advertizing, and materialism...where's the garden in all of this? How difficult it can be to find, feel and experience the holy now!

A fear I have with Parker's radically realized eschatology, it's assertion that we are in the garden, is akin to my feelings about the conclusion, the summation that comes at the end of Voltaire's *Candide*. His fictional characters have gone through every kind of imaginable affront to human dignity: earthquakes, inquisitions, kidnappings, senseless deaths—catastrophes

innumerable—and his philosophical conclusion to all this mayhem?: “cultivate your own garden.” I get it; and am tempted myself. But there’s something wanting here...a kind of lateral disregard for others; a resignation, a final, self-absorbed indifference to the fate of others and the world.

The Scottish poet Edwin Muir wrote a poem called “One Foot in Eden.” One foot in Eden...? It’s a tentative conclusion that Muir claimed; and it was dearly won—arrived at by him only after severe personal losses and a sober reckoning with the mass violence he lived through in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One foot in Eden...? perhaps; though more often than not, I still feel very much cast out from it; and the road is long, though I’m trying to find, somehow, a way back in. It’s not easy.

And beauty? Think about this with me for a moment: The root meaning of our word beauty means fairness, not just what is comely, or attractive. Rather, beauty is a condition of fairness; of what is good, well, and fitting. Beauty is closely related to the word bounty; that is, plenitude and liberality. Our language of moral judgment is saturated with aesthetic ideas, opinions and judgments. The virtues and vices we experience in the lives of others and ourselves prompt us to come up with expressions like: fine, delightful, simple, pure, sweet *and* rotten, vile, foul, ugly, sick and gross in order to help us describe what we do, think, value and feel. That is to say, the experience of beauty and ugliness can put us in contact with moral ideals or the absence of them.

It’s possible, though far from certain, that by placing ourselves on the path of beauty, we prepare ourselves for justice, not just tending one’s own garden. It may be that beauty acts to agitate us to bring more beauty into the world; it can convey a heightened sense of aliveness to ourselves and access to what’s alive and striving in others. It puts us into a state of high alert to

the arrival and achievement of beauty, and can make us even more conscious of when it is not attained. Rather than stopping us from seeing and striving against the ugliness of injustice, want and violence, the desire to walk in beauty seeks the widest possible distribution of its goods to the greatest number of people. It incites us to share its wealth: that heightened sense of awareness, care, protection and enhancement we feel whenever we encounter what is truly beautiful. “Beauty prepares us for justice.” (Elaine Scarry)

If that’s what Rebecca Parker means by paradise now and beauty—then how can I be a Scrooge; how can I say: Bah Humbug!?

## **Eschatology, Joe Part 2.**

I would add to Steven’s comments on beauty, which I appreciate and agree with, that part of the core at the center of the spiritual discipline in finding beauty is gratitude.

Take this jar of tomatoes I brought with me from my Mom’s kitchen. It has its own simple beauty, and not just because my Mom canned it herself.

This jar, for me, represents many stories. We, as a family, learned to can in the late 1970’s because my Mom is always trying to save money, because honestly, my parents needed to watch every penny. There are a lot of family stories about canning and putting up vegetables and jams and things in my family.

Those stories are in this jar of tomatoes. And other stories of my own. I have canned my own vegetables and put up fruit also to watch my pennies. There are also stories of women in the plains and farms who put up food to this day to make it through long harsh winters. There’s a whole history of food here in this little jar.

What people who live at the less lush corner of the garden know is this: If you can’t take away my ability to see Beauty and bounty around me, you can’t break my spirit.

The working poor of this world know that they're never going to own their own house on the Lake or Oceanfront, if they ever get to own a house at all. But in their own spaces, beauty can be found, even if, compared to the volume of obvious beauty around the wealthy, it is precious little.

Yes, it's true. Life in this world can be unfair and can punish those who ought not be punished. But when life is not handing you a dozen long-stemmed roses in a pretty box, still there are dandelions in the park.

When we stop saying that long-stemmed roses have more beauty value than the dandelion, when we can stop attaching our own sense of worth to which flower we get to see, and how those flowers cross our paths, then we are really going to be on to something!

Yes, there is ugliness in this world. And injustice and mistreatment. But if all I ever focused on were those things, I couldn't go on. I would feel crushed that only once in my life did I receive long-stemmed roses.

Instead I walk the sidewalks, looking for little purple wildflowers in the cracks. Knowing that like so many, those flowers have pushed through concrete to be seen, and so often they're walked right by. I promise to try to see them and be glad for the gift.

I've been working with Laura Imayoshi's program for 3 months now, and I see first hand every week women who remind me of my cousins back home. Rough lives, addiction, men who abuse them. And then I watch them interact. True, there is sometimes pettiness about who is getting more variety of food, or more volume of food. These are the women who've lost their ability to see any beauty. It stings my heart. And for them, I try to bring a little beauty into their lives, even if it's only a couple of hours a week. I'm a former waiter, and I treat the ladies as if they've come into my restaurant to dine.

And then there are the ladies for whom beauty is not lost. They're able to acknowledge a small kindness, because even in a harsh life, they are not completely closed to it. I have seen them bring new women in from the street, get Laura involved and already I'm convinced they helped save one young woman from freezing (to death) last month. They brought her in for dinner, they called her Honey and Sweetie, and sat her down to eat with them, and then Laura and others found some clothing to wear that would be better for the cold snap we were having.

Their collective action is a good example of what I mean when I say that we have a responsibility to attend to the Garden. With their very limited resources, still they were able to

reach out to someone in at least temporary deeper need than they themselves were. They offered her kindness, they used their knowledge to offer material assistance they might not have had themselves.

To me, this is why the ability to recognize that we are all still in the Garden of God is so important.

Maybe the Garden of Eden has been oversold to us, as some place where everything was handed to Adam and Eve with ease. *There are stories of “the Golden Age” of fill in the blank in every culture.*

And yes, our world is anything but fair and equitable.

But if we can celebrate the small beauties that enter our lives, we don't have to be filled with despair. We can share those beauties with others, we can create new beauty for others. We can use the energy, the love that comes from beauty and all that Steven said about fairness as the root word, we can use this to do what the Social Gospel folk charged us to do. We can create God's Kin-dom here on Earth. We can use the power of our Love to witness to the world our eschatology that God loves every being.

And we can stay together in this Garden, our Garden, and invite new folks to join us. And we can share with them our ways that we find beauty, and we can ask them to teach us how they find beauty.

May we be bold enough, and brave enough and loving enough to make this so. And from here, we can and will change our world.