

SERMON: “A Mix of Son and Cloud”

First United Church, Waterloo – REIGN OF CHRIST SUNDAY, November 21, 2021

PRAYER: Holy Mystery, God of all ages, address us by your Word and captivate us, even if that Word is cryptic. Enable us to suspend reason, to forego foreknowledge, and to think, feel, and intuit outside the box. So we pray in the liberating and transforming power of Jesus. Amen

I don't know for sure, you tell me; but, my guess is that United Church folks don't spend too many restless hours worrying about matters like the Exaltation of Jesus, Final Judgement, the end of the world, and/or the Second Coming of Jesus.

Those notions, that language, however, is here – lodged in the Bible.

They are also named, listed in our own doctrinal beliefs in our Basis of Union, and, in our more recent “Song of Faith” revision, they are given this nod:

“We place our hope in God. We sing of a life beyond life and a future beyond imagining: a new heaven and a new earth, the end of sorrow, pain, and tears, Christ's return and life with God, the making new of all things.

We yearn for the coming of that future, even while participating in eternal life now.”

And perhaps that's more appropriate. Better we concentrate on righting the wrongs of our past and living for Jesus as best we can in the here and now.

That's easier to manage and contemplate because, often, when the Bible points to that more distant future, it uses uncommon, not straight-forward language and symbols.

It's coded language to which biblical scholars have given the label “apocalyptic”.

It's language that is cryptic and that sounds to many like it's drug-induced.

You know: visions, hearing voices, allusions, and dreamscapes. What's with that?

So many of us have been schooled, even pressured, not to think or imagine so out of the box.

Remember that hit by the band Supertramp in the 1980s: “The Logical Song”?

When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful, a miracle, oh, it was beautiful, magical. All the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so happily, oh, joyfully, playfully watching me. But then they send me away to teach me how to be sensible, logical, oh responsible, practical. And they showed me a world where I could be so dependable, clinical, oh intellectual, cynical. I

Sadly, I think we still pretty much do that to all our youth and children, if not in our parenting, then, by and large, in our educational system that values science, mathematics, and reason, above the arts and imagination. We call it growing up and grooming them for “real” jobs.

There may be some point to all that, but surely it doesn't help us much when we encounter Bible verses like Daniel 7:13-14 and Revelation 1:5b-7.

Here they are again in the orbit of our hearing:

“As I watched in the night visions, I saw One like a human being coming with heaven's clouds. And that One came to the Ancient One and was presented before God. And to that one was given dominion and glory and sovereignty”

“To Jesus, who loves us and freed us from our sins by bloodshed, and made us to be a commonwealth, priests serving God who is his Parent, to Jesus, the Christ, be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

“Look! Christ is coming with the clouds, every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on Christ’s account all tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen”

This is all symbolic speech seeking to capture the content of ecstatic visions and still speak truth. It sounds hallucinatory; comparable to choruses from Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” or “The Ballroom Blitz” segment of “The Rocky Horror Picture Show”.

But these authors were not high on cocaine or opioids. They were high in the Holy Spirit.

They were in deep touch with God in the midst of their own troubled and uncertain times.

They wrote the way they wrote so that their persecutors and enemies would have no clue about what they were actually inferring and proclaiming. A mix of Son and clouds? Huh?

But ... the faithful ones in the congregations they addressed could easily decode the cryptograms and mystic messages and feel strengthened to persist and hold fast to faith.

The Greek word, *“apokalypsos”* means “to unveil or draw back the curtain”. Let’s look.

In both Daniel and Revelation, *“the Son of Humanity who comes on the clouds”*

does not come down from God; rather, that One is presented to God and given *“dominion”*.

It’s not a solo sovereignty because it gets shared with all of God’s faithful sons and daughters.

So, to people who were suffering under oppressive, unjust, and plain wacko governance,

God’s Word was: “Fear not! Hang in there. Ultimate control of the world, all creation is mine.

Empires and systems of unjust and abusive power will crack and crumble.

The true and righteous rule of the world will wind up in your hands, emerge from your hearts.

That “Son of Humanity” imaged as coming on the clouds is a corporate figure.

Even as it attached itself to Jesus, the Christ, individually, who accepted it;

it also stood for all those who would live into their own Christ-likeness age after age,

who would be continually fashioned into a commonwealth and royal priesthood.

Before there is anything like a Grand Finale to human history on earth,

there will be ongoing cycles of “end-times”.

The author of Daniel used the images of fantastic beasts to describe empires already *passé*:

Babylon, Persia, Medea. And, just like them, the brutal Seleucid Empire of his own time

that held ugly sway over Israel/Palestine would also crumble

to make way for God’s better ways for ruling a world to evolve into reality.

Similarly, the author of Revelation used code language to embolden persecuted congregations to persist and resist the oppression of Rome’s Emperor, who in their time was Domitian.

Indeed, the Seleucid, the Greek, and Roman Empires did eventually decline and fall; as did

the Holy Roman Empire, Genghis Khan’s China, the Spanish, French, and British Empires,

the threatening menace of the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, and every other pretender

to world dominance also along the way and ever since.

Which also goes for all who may yet be gung-ho for America to call all the global shots now.

And for any pesky and upstart group of terrorists, and even for a non-human virus.

There is always a time limit on how long the world can tolerate tyrants, injustice, and captivity.

God is always busy empowering and fortifying those who are part of resistance movements.

God is always out to free human beings from any form of slavery, bondage, exercise of privilege.

Commenting some years ago on Revelation 1:4-8, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza wrote:

“Only when God and the Lamb reign on earth is (such liberation) accomplished. Then, a new, more humanized world shall be created by God where there shall no longer be weeping and mourning, hunger and thirst, pain and death.” 2

Even in the most troublesome and contorted times of human history, God’s better governance, the reign of Christ in creation, continues to find realization.

Hello church! Hello sisters and brothers in faith, as the “body of Christ”

we already participate in Christ’s Second Coming ushering in the fullness of God’s realm.

How do we make that happen?

How do we appropriate both our innate natural powers and our supernatural ones?

I say that because the One, whom we re-present, who is given godly dominion as the just replacement for tyrannical earthly rulers, is both a human and supernatural figure.

Might we image it as something like cloud storage in the information-technology world?

Cloud storage is a way you and I can send all kinds of data to a huge remote filing cabinet.

By doing that, we don’t clog up and overload the hard drive or memory on our own computer, or I-pad-like device, or cellphone.

When we want to access the tunes, memos, documents, photos and such we have stored away, we can get an automatic recall from the cloud back to whatever device we have handy.

One master control server links together millions of other data servers in one system.

That’s the cloud to which we can have access anywhere, anytime (as long as there’s Wi-Fi).

The Son of Humanity, a.k.a. the exalted Christ, functions like our remote server.

For me, and for others I know, it’s about tapping into that Christ-server when our own resistance and/or transformative powers aren’t enough.

For several decades now, I’ve been increasingly conscious of having “white male” power.

Figuring out conscientiously how to divest myself of that in our culture is an ongoing struggle.

I cannot do it alone.

It isn’t only about how I view or treat women, but about how I hand over power to them or discern how to share power mutually with them.

It a similar struggle in the fields of racial and ethnic justice, other acreages of human rights.

That runs from the smaller but important habits of the language I use and jokes I tell to actually building significant and mutually respectfully friendships and partnerships.

There’s still a lot of growing, transforming work to do.

I have met with, and at times encouraged, a number of women who have found the gumption to leave an abusive relationship.

Many of them say that they could not have done it without the support of friends, counsellors, and even more direct experiences of God’s love and inner strengthening carrying them through.

In addition, for me and many others, there’s the recurring everyday challenge of detaching ourselves from the lures and snares of our materialistic, consumer culture, seeking “to live more simply so that others may simply live.”

As part of “the body of Christ”, we get to help God’s inbreaking commonwealth happen, usually only by little moves and several centimeters forward, sometimes in leaps and bounds.

I wonder, what are the struggles and challenges that now engage your attention and effort?
When and how do you know you need some outside assistance from the likes of God?
Though it may seem and sound weird to others, we do have access to a form of “cloud storage”
that can help make for a different, more just, more godly world.

CONCLUSION

“I saw One like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.

And that One came to the Ancient One and was presented

And to that One was given dominion and sovereignty.”

Yes, this is the language of investiture and enthronement. Yes, it’s coded language.

But it is also truth unveiled.

And we, seeking to be numbered among God’s faithful and companions of Jesus,
are also crowned.

By Jesus, through Jesus, God is investing hope and spiritual power in us
forming us into a royal priesthood, equipping us as agents of God’s realm of commonwealth.

We get to offer, mediate, and channel God’s grace and transforming power
to others, to the world in which we live in our time, to all creation.

We can open ourselves to being made new as we share in helping God make all things new.

Glory, honour, praise, and thanksgiving be to such a God.

*1 “The Logical Song” from Supertramp, Breakfast in American album, released March 1979.
Lyric by Roger Hodgson.*

*2 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment, (Fortress Press,
Philadelphia, PA: 1985), page 68.*