

# Sunday Morning Apocalypse

Mark Feldmeir

A few years ago I joined a friend on a three-day snow camping trip into the local mountains of southern California. Despite my inexperience as a backpacker, my survivalist friend assured me that I was in good hands. He provided all the necessary gear, carried the well-worn maps, and led the way up the cold white mountain.

At the end of the first day, after hours of hiking, we set up camp before setting out to explore the valley, walking the familiar trail which my friend had trekked a dozen times before on previous packing trips. Within an hour the skies grew dark and heavy with sudden cloud cover, quietly yielding a fresh blanket of snow across the valley floor, concealing the hard-packed trail of ice behind us. As we turned back, our trail slowly disappeared before us with each anxious step; the bleak sunlight gradually surrendered to the darkness beneath the thick canopy of pines; a veil of white shrouded the air space and landscape in all directions. In a matter of moments, we were lost. Only neither of us could bring ourselves to admit it.

Instead, we kept walking, stumbling over fallen trees and hidden rocks, searching for the trail, alone on the stormy mountain. We did this for six hours, feeling for the elusive, hidden trail with our booted feet, probing the darkness in semi-panic, wandering aimlessly deep into the night, until I finally remembered a line from Rollo May, who once said that it's an old ironic habit of

humans to run faster when they have lost their way. So we agreed to stop walking, to stop moving, to sit where we were and have a hard laugh, or a hard cry, whichever came first.

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I can offer no rational explanation for what happened next. Call it a strange twist of fate, or even blind luck, though providence and grace seem the better choice of

words. The simple truth is that my friend, unwittingly, had sat down on the very trail that had eluded us for most of the night. It did not reveal itself to him all at once; nor, at first, was it much more than a mere hunch. But leaning back to rest on his two gloved hands, he suddenly felt, to his surprise, the hard-packed trail of ice below the surface of the snow; then, moving quickly

to his knees, sweeping away the fresh powder, he scratched and pawed at the hidden mystery underneath it all, laughing at himself, at us, at the seeming coincidence of his unexpected discovery.

We walked several steps along that trail until we could no longer see or feel it beneath our feet, at which time we paused, knelt down, and uncovered a few more feet of it, before moving on again with vigilance. We repeated this ritual over and over again, for more than an hour—walk, pause, kneel, uncover, walk. We made the entire trip back to camp that way.

Preaching in an increasingly postmodern context is something of an “apocalyptic” enterprise—an act of uncovering, unveiling, revealing the deep mysteries of a God whose footprints in this world, as the psalmist says, are not easily seen, even by the eyes of the faithful. We now preach in an age in which we cannot assume that our listeners know anything at all about the faith journey upon which we are taking them, or the destination to which it leads; neither can we assume that the familiar trails we were once trained to take as preachers are still accessible or viable in a post-Christendom, post-Enlightenment world.

A growing number of our listeners, particularly the postmodern pilgrims among us, bring to their faith journey a robust suspicion of religious authority and a deep hunger for personal experience, honest searching, humility, and relentless discovery—all of which challenge our traditional modes of Christian proclamation that have relied heavily over the years on reason, proposition, and prescription. For these new listeners, the journey of faith is as compelling as the destination, the Way and the Life as persuasive and fulfilling as the Truth. From what we know of them, they tend to perceive faith not primarily as a stand to be taken, but a path to be tread. Along that path, doubt and ambiguity are not necessarily challenges to be resolved, removed, or even feared, but probed and re-described with the language of grace, wonder, and acceptance. They demand of the preacher something more than mere rhetorical skill, better answers, artistic imagination, cultural relevancy, or technological savvy. They come seeking one who will dare to preach humbly from the

knees, with arms outstretched toward the elusive mystery of our faith, inviting them into the collaborative act of uncovering what is often dimly seen and scarcely felt in this world, and rejoicing with them at what is found along the way—one watchful step after another.

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we travel with our listeners is concealed by many unchallenged, and commonly accepted, cultural ideologies that must be named, subverted, and swept aside in order to make any measurable progress toward the kingdom of God. Briefly, I offer two such ideologies, or myths, which seem to pose the greatest challenge to preaching the gospel in our postmodern context; and with each, I propose a faithful alternative in our preaching that may help to clear the path and lead us forward with our listeners, unfettered.

## The Myth of the Self-Made Individual

Success in America has always been perceived as an individual enterprise, and the gospel preached by the modern church has long been its primary catalyst, reinforcing a rugged self-reliance which maintains that success or failure is measured by our individual efforts and abilities and that the religious and moral life should ideally bring us to our deserved station in life. As a result, posterity and prosperity became the tangible indicators of one's faithfulness and God's blessing; moral character, shaped by “biblical” values, became the highest ideal for the Christian; and the gospel became the principle prescription for the elimination of one's suffering, the avoidance of pain, and the resolution of one's problems in life.

Much of our modern self-help, self-

improvement preaching these days has adopted the cultural hermeneutic of Home Depot's “You can do it, we can help” self-absorbed optimism, offering steps or keys for an improved, successful life in this world rather than a transformed life in the kingdom of God. When that occurs, Jesus of Nazareth is often indistinguishable from Stephen Covey, Leo Buscaglia, or Tony Robbins; worship becomes a spiritualized seminar; and the sermon, a practical “how to” lesson with biblical propositions from disconnected texts. While it is true that our postmodern listeners are regarded as highly pragmatic, they are not persuaded by a “try harder,” “your best life now,” “Jabez” gospel. As Tyler Durden, in the movie *Fight*

*Club*, confesses:

“We are the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no great war, no Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our Great Depression . . . is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars, but we won't . . . . And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very . . . very . . . [angry].”

If we're daring enough to invite Tyler Durden to church on a Sunday morning, then our preaching must acknowledge the failures and idolatry of our cultural obsession with work, competition, individualism, greed, and materialism, and it must seek to offer an alternative script that redefines the “blessed” life not in terms of success, but God's providence and grace, our neighborliness and charity, and the honest, liberating admission of our own limited ability to save ourselves. Such preaching is unafraid to speak of suffering or failure as something not to be summarily overcome or resolved, but patiently explored, probed, and affirmed as a sacramental—a means of grace through which we experience the presence of God and an enduring solidarity with Jesus. Preachers who can give voice to the experiences of suffering, disillusionment, doubt and human weakness on behalf of their listeners will claim a deep faithfulness to a consistent biblical theology that affirms that our spiritual character as believers is formed as much by what we endure and what is lost as it is by our achievements and conscious choices. From slavery in

Egypt to exile in Babylon, from the shores of Galilee to the garden at Gethsemane, God's people live continuously in the inescapable tension between call and ambiguity, doxology and lament, orthodoxy and doubt, death and resurrection. A postmodern hermeneutic, sweeping aside the illusion of the self-made individual, understands such tension not as an obstacle to the journey, but as a necessary catalyst for a continued dependency on God's preventing, justifying, and sanctifying grace.

## The Myth of the Therapeutic Christ

One legacy of our modern theological education is the pervasive assumption that the primary role of the pastor is that of the skilled helper, the resident therapist, the counselor and healer who can fix your marriage, your budget, your grief, and your petulant child. We emerged from seminary and entered local church ministry with a rich therapeutic, psychological lexicon to describe the human condition; we came to view human sin in terms of disorders and pathologies, often at the expense of a balanced theological and spiritual articulation of the Gospel, which calls forth not an improved life, but a transformed life. The language of personal sin, confession, repentance, conversion, and sanctification became increasingly marginalized by a preoccupation with the social gospel, which identified sin in the larger, systemic social ills of racism, sexism, injustice, inequality, and violence, to which the modern preacher responded with the language of equality, tolerance, diversity and justice.

Out of necessity, the project of the social gospel will continue to have its central place in our preaching among post-moderns, as will our growing sensitivity to the unique psychological, behavioral and relational brokenness of our listeners. But the task of the postmodern preacher is to call forth not merely human and social change, but complete transformation through conversion, using daring speech that names our sin, subverts our assumptions and patterns of living, and invites our listeners into a new script that imaginatively re-describes one's life in the kingdom of God. It begins with exposing the unexposed, and anticipates the revelation of a whole new life beneath it. While it is a risky undertaking for the preacher, it is

equally rewarding, as the writer, Anne Lamott, suggests:

"If there is one door to the castle you have been told not to go through, you must. Otherwise, you'll just be rearranging furniture in rooms you've already been in. Most human beings are dedicated to keeping that one door shut. But the writer's job is to see what's behind that door, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words—not just into any words but if we can, into rhythm and blues."<sup>1</sup>

The rhythm and blues of the converted is otherwise known as doxology, which acknowledges that on the faith journey, sometimes we find grace, and sometimes grace finds us.

Every Sunday morning our listeners join us on a journey for which they are wholly unprepared to travel alone, on a trail that is often concealed by these, and many other, competing claims upon their lives. We know that our work as preachers is both hazardous and holy, but the truth is that it always has been, for every preacher in every new age. Ours is no different, yet most of us fear that the stakes are much higher in this age. Fewer seem willing to journey with us; the old maps no longer seem adequate; our trail is dimly seen, even as we trust that we will either find it or it will find us. So we proceed humbly, preaching with vigilance—walking, pausing, kneeling, uncovering, walking—Sunday to Sunday. It may mean that we spend more time on the mountain than we had planned, but I am confident we can make the entire trip to the kingdom that way. □

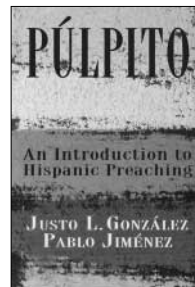
1. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 198.



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