



## The terrible ungluing

*Malachi 4: 1-6; Psalm 82;  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13;  
Luke 21:5-19.*

**A**LL THIS TALK about the end-time is intellectually difficult and pastorally problematic. Bultmann did not resolve the problem by his existentialist dissolving of it. He did nonetheless sense the problem acutely. The problem is that end-time talk, which permeates the New Testament, is deeply incongruous with our intellectual world. We find such talk not only embarrassing but unconvincing. The world seems much too solid and stable to be so ready for an ending. Besides, none of us wants to sound like a religious crazy. Our affluence as well as our education causes us instinctively to opt for something like a “realized eschatology.” And now, with the “triumph of capitalism” and Fukuyama’s “End of History,” our treasured eschaton does seem to be completely realized.

And yet, for all our intellectual sophistication, seemingly assured affluence and confidence in our technology, a deep, unsettled feeling that things are indeed falling apart cuts across the social and ideological spectrum. Without being apocalyptic, a lot of folk sense that we have come to some kind of massive ending.

Item: our best institutions seem oddly dysfunctional. Churches worry about survival, courts only sometimes yield justice, medical institutions provide sporadic access and care, schools only occasionally educate and all our institutions seem in a deep crisis of purpose as well as finances.

Item: the presence and threat of violence is everywhere, on TV and randomly in our neighborhoods as well as in our popular policies of defense. Even our privileged places are filled with dis-ease. Our bold rhetoric about our public space—“take it back”—has little substance or effect.

Item: double-speak has largely driven out serious political discourse,

so that a genuine public agenda is difficult to imagine.

Item: people inhale the deep and wide unrest that surges in the night, in irrational artistry, in nightmares which since Joseph and Daniel—and differently since Freud—have been seen as the in-breaking of the Holy in all its irrational, sovereign threat—or is it invitation?

**E**ntusted with these texts, the church has a unique duty and chance to speak about this moment of danger and loss. Three things work in our favor. First, the church is widely expected to be a truth-teller, to be a community that does not flinch from calling things by their right names. (Of course, when the church is too much in collusion with the old order, it has no capacity or will for truth-telling.) The church has warrant to speak about the unspeakable. Second, the church has a permit to do its truth-telling in the presence of and in reference to the Holy One whose name we know. No serious person imagines that this large ungluing is a failure of this or that detail. It is much more elemental than that. And we dare imagine that this massive, frightening ungluing contains within it the resolve, work and promise of the Holy One, who is not finally committed to any particular world order, including this one. Third, more than having the inchoate sense of God’s holiness, the church has these lyrical, daring, jarring texts which provide images and phrases and nuances, so that we may speak about this ungluing when we ourselves only stammer in fear and intimidation.

I propose the not-very-novel notion that texts like Malachi 4 and Luke 21 be used for naming our time without excessive application or rationalization. The text knows better than we do how to say the unsayable. In our speaking and in our hearing this awesome Gospel text, none of us will linger too

long over analytic categories like “ancient apocalyptic.” The genre is acutely real for us and needs no great explaining: we know about the prospect that “not one stone will be left upon another,” as we watch our treasured arrangements disintegrate before our eyes, and we watch helplessly (Luke 21:6). We cast about for a timetable, wondering how much time we have left before the earth is too hot or the oil is gone. We ask whether there is still time for a remedy, and we cringe from the expected answer.

We also know, with the admonition of verse 8, that the dis-ease admits of no such control or assurance. We live in the midst of wars and insurrections, because the old conventions of respect and condescension no longer serve. The juices of rage and yearning are loosed. Grasping assertions long kept muted will not be silenced. It may be that we have too much of the media; in any case, we are privy to too many wars, revolutions and upheavals to miss the point of these texts (verse 9). I do not conclude that these happenings are “portents from heaven”—but I refuse to imagine that God’s holiness is not awesomely generative. We are admonished in the disorder to run the risk of knowing, trusting and testifying—so subversive, so offensive, so foolish—and to be hated but not harmed in our testimony.

**T**his is no scare theology, nor is it an intellectual solution to the problem of eschatology. It is rather our characteristic interface between text and experience, between old poem and current emergency. On the one hand, we need to voice the terrible ungluing, because if it is unvoiced, we will die of brutalizing fear. On the other hand, it will take an outrageous poem, one like Luke 21, to let the Holy in on our emergency. Where such subversive sketching is sounded, we may “gain our souls” (verse 19) even while our old world gasps and shudders. The nightmarish voice could in an utterance become dreaming hope.

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