

Contents

Easter 5

"... Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

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	Page
1. Lectionary Selection Revelation 21:1-6	54
2. Exploring the Pattern	55
3. Reading Between the Lines	58
4. Parallel Readings	60
From:	
<i>Newsweek</i>	
<i>The New York Times</i>	
<i>The Case for God</i>	
<i>The Lost Symbol</i>	
<i>Olive Kitteridge</i>	
5. Critical Background M. Eugene Boring	66

• Lectionary Readings (Year C)

Revised Common Lectionary

First Reading	Acts 11:1-18
Second Reading	Revelation 21:1-6
Gospel	John 13:31-35
Psalm	148

Revelation 21:1-6

- 1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had
2 passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,
3 coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
4 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
- 5 "See, the home of God is among mortals.
6 He will dwell with them as their God;
7 they will be his peoples,
8 and God himself will be with them;
9 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
10 Death will be no more;
11 mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
12 for the first things have passed away."
- 13 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also
14 he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is
15 done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give
16 water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

1. The New Testament “Book of Revelation” is an apocalyptic text. The Greek word, *apokalypsis*, is most often translated as “unveiling” as well as “revelation.” The hidden things, especially of the end times, are now seen. In the midst of shaking foundations and unraveling, a cryptic message tells about how the ending is really a new beginning. It is an unveiling of *a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more*. It may be read as a myth of re-creation in which the chaotic sea has disappeared and a *new Jerusalem* arrives from God. The challenge is to explore how such a promise reflects the fears and hopes of the Jesus movement at the turn of the first century as well as how it speaks to us in 2010.

2. We are told that *death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for . . .* The *for* suggests that what is required before these things will be no more? What is needed before such hurt and suffering is left behind?

for the first things have passed away. . .

What are *first things*? “First” implies what to you about timing, place, value or precedence? For those who lived 2000 years ago and for us today, what are some of the “first things” in our lives?

How would you describe “first things” for them and for us in terms of:

possessions?

allegiances?

values?

perceptions?

identity?

conviction?

devotion?

At the Workbench: Easter 5

How do such *first things* pass away? Pass? Away? What is being described here about holding on and letting go, clinging and release? How does it happen? What does it require? What is the result when it does not happen?

"See, I am making all things new."

How are things made *new*? When you consider possessions, allegiances, values, perceptions, identity, conviction, and devotion, what is implied by them being made "new"? Where have the old or "first things" gone? What can you say about such a transition? How does it begin? What fuels or feeds the movement toward the "new"? What gets in the way? What stops such a process?

3. What have you known in your life about "first things" having "passed away"? Name some of the things, beliefs, relationships, hopes and fears, yearnings and forebodings, strengths and weaknesses that used to be first, central, at your core that are no longer there? How did that happen? Where did they go? What did you lose? What did you gain?

What are some of the *first things* at this stage of your life? "First things" for you today might include what?

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Revelation 21:1-6 • May 2, 2010

What are these “first things” doing for you? What are they unable to do? Why do you suppose you are holding on to them? How are they clinging to you? What might happen were any of them to “pass away”?

4. What have you known in your life about things being made *new*? Along the way what can you recall about newness being born in you as a result of some “first thing” being left behind? Name one time in your life when this happened. How would you describe what took place?

What is one of the “first things” in your life today that is calling out to “pass away”? How is it costing too much, weighing you down, and no longer working? What are the ways it continues to hold, endure, demand your attention, and require your energy? In your wildest dream how might this “first thing” pass away and you become “new”?

Were this to happen what is a thirst in you that might be quenched by *the water of life*?

Reading Between the Lines

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell among them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes."

". . . [T]hy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

In your town, church, or family, what would God's will being *done on earth as it is in heaven* look like? Take some time to make representation, in form and color, of God's kingdom on the earth you know. (Seems like a good chance to cut loose with everything from clay to markers to pages torn out of magazines.) You might want to let making your representation stretch over several days as new ideas come to you and/or you reject old ones. At last, sit with what you have made. How does it seem different from the world you know? How may it be just the same? Where and how will you find yourself living in God's kingdom *on earth as it is in heaven*?



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I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem. . . The one who was seated on the throne. . . in a loud voice. . . says, "See, the home of God is among mortals. . . See, I am making all things new..."

See. . . This week I had cataract surgery. This involved, as many of you no doubt know, the removal of a clouded and opaque lens in my eyes, with its attendant darkening and distorted vision. A clear artificial lens was implanted, one which corrected my vision, as well as allowing more light and less distortion to come through. I didn't know how badly my vision really was until the distorted natural lens was removed, and I could see more clearly, see anew the world I thought I knew. The world is radically different, brighter, sharper, more focused. It's an experience both sobering and exhilarating.

I wonder if exploring our experience of *seeing* might not be helpful in revealing something of what is happening in our passage. *Seeing anew.*

Think literally for a moment about your eyes. Do you see well? Do you have defects of vision that make it difficult to see? If so, how did you discover that you weren't seeing as you were "supposed" to? How "skewed" is your vision? Even if your vision is 20-20, think about the way the world looks to us, simply because we have bipolar vision and color cones as receptors in our eyes. Do sharks or slugs see the same world we do? Does the woman next to you see the same world you do?

What "surgery" would it take to see things anew? To see things "slant"? What *new things* might you see? What home of God might we then see among mortals?

Are you willing to risk the cutting away of how you now see?



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Parallel Readings

From *Newsweek*

2012: A Y2K for the New Age

Scholars rarely love popularizers, and nowhere is this enmity more evident than in the battle over 2012—a date which, depending on your view, will coincide with the end of the world, the transformation of global consciousness, the end of the Mayan calendar, the beginning of another cycle of the Mayan calendar. . . or nothing at all. “I don’t pay any attention to this stuff because it’s bunk,” says Anne Pyburn, an anthropologist at Indiana University who studies the Maya. Among followers of New Age religions, though, and particularly among those who like to celebrate the equinox at the Mayan ruin Chichen-Itza on Mexico’s Yucatán peninsula, the belief that the year 2012 will mark a global transformation is widespread. In bookstores, on shelves marked “magic” or “divination,” numerous volumes promote this view—and many more are on their way, from publishers as big as HarperOne and as small as Bear & Company, a New Age publisher in Rochester, Vt. Around Thanksgiving, Sony Pictures plans to release “2012.” The trailer for the movie shows the oceans washing over mountains that look like the Himalayas while the face of a monk registers terror. One of the most popular authors in the 2012 category is John Major Jenkins, a self-described “independent researcher” whose 1998 book “Maya Cosmogenesis 2012” helped usher in this craze. “Around the year we call 2012,” he writes, “a large chapter in human history will be coming to an end. All the values and assumptions of the previous World Age will expire, and a new phase of human growth will commence.”

David Freidel is an archeologist at Washington University in St. Louis. He recently agreed to speak at a New Age conference on 2012, he says, mainly because he wanted to deprive Jenkins of the opportunity. “I immediately said yes so I could get to the podium before the charlatans do,” says Freidel. He has studied the Mayan calendar (actually, calendars), and while he agrees that what’s called the “long count” calendar does end in 2012, he believes that the Maya—were they still living by their ancient system of dates—would not have seen it as any kind of cataclysm. The year 2012 is nothing more than the resetting of a clock, an odometer reaching zero before it starts again, he says. Freidel accuses Jenkins and other popularizers of inventing a theology to support their view that the world is in decline—and that an external force will soon intervene to

Lisa Miller, “2012: A Y2K for the New Age,” from *Newsweek*, May 18, 2009. www.newsweek.com/id/195688. Used by permission.

set things right. "There is a tendency," he says, "to be wholly naive on the part of individuals who want to see consciousness raised on a global scale." Jenkins defends himself against accusations that he's a fraud, saying, "Read my book, look at the bibliography."

Pyburn complains that the 2012 phenomenon makes exotics out of the Maya. "When people who have been colonized and oppressed decide they want to use their heritage to promote themselves, that's their choice. When it's being done by wealthy First-World nations, I think that's exploitative and I have a problem with it." Her Indiana University colleague Quetzil Castañeda makes a similar argument a different way. "The Maya," he says, is a Western tag for a diverse group of people who lived—and indeed still live—without any unifying language or culture. To speak of any belief as "Mayan" is like saying "all brown people are the same. We obliterate the fact that they speak 28 different languages, there are 8 million of them—today. If they're all called Maya, they must be identical." In Mexico, he adds, the real Maya think of 2012 as "a gringo invention." In America, we have always been uniquely receptive to end-times prophesy—Y2K is the most recent example. What's unique about 2012 is that it appeals not to fundamentalist Christians but to the New Age set.

Lisa Miller

From *The New York Times*

Once Again, Into the Apocalypse

A lot of people are worrying about the world coming to an end in 2012.

Bummer. I thought we'd gotten over all that in 2000.

The question of whether the End of Time will arrive during the holiday shopping season three years hence is already the subject of a veritable library of books. We also have what "The Complete Idiot's Guide to 2012" claims are almost 600,000 Web sites devoted to worrying about it.

This seems to be the fault of Nostradamus, the Mayan calendar, angst on the left about global warming and angst on the right about the election of Barack Obama. Or the health care bill. Or government bailouts. Or the repositioning of "In God We Trust" on the nation's coinage.

Really, for ultraconservatives, the last year has been one sign of the apocalypse after the other. Soon, the rivers will run red with Starbucks Raspberry-Flavored Tazo Passion Shaken Iced Tea. Owls will give birth to two-headed frogs who shriek the lyrics to Lady Gaga songs.

Hollywood is unleashing a raft of movies about humanity tottering on the edge of extinction. In "2012," a G-8 summit convenes to discuss the fact that "the world as we know it will

Gail Collins, "Once Again, Into the Apocalypse" from *The New York Times*, Saturday, November 14, 2009.

Keeping things vague, or subject to multiple interpretations, is the real key to apocalyptic predictions.

soon come to an end.” Actually, I would not be surprised if the participants found this preferable to another round of the Doha trade talks.

The film characters who are best prepared for the planetary calamity had been consulting the ancient Mayan calendar, which runs through more than five millennia and then comes screeching to a halt on Dec. 21, 2012. Some say that for the Mayans, this was just the end of a cycle, like completing a really long year, and that if they’d been able to hang around for a few more centuries they’d simply have issued a new, post-2012 calendar, this time perhaps including some nice pictures of puppies.

Others see more dire forces at work. In “2012,” the crust of the earth starts bouncing around like Tom DeLay in that cha-cha competition. No one can save us, not the black president or the governor of California with an Austrian accent. Certainly the Europeans can’t help, since not even the collapse of every tall building on the planet can get Americans to pay attention to non-American ideas.

Also coming soon to a theater near you are: “The Road” (Viggo Mortensen struggles across a barren landscape after a mysterious cataclysm) and “The Book of Eli” (Denzel Washington guards a book that could save post-apocalypse humanity from Gary Oldman). Obviously, Hollywood has determined that the reason all those Iraq-war-themed movies failed was that the moviegoers felt the scenery wasn’t bleak enough.

I’ve been disappointed that, so far, almost no one has noticed that St. Malachy’s List of the Last Popes has been running out of gas almost as fast as the Mayan calendar. Malachy was an Irish bishop who died in 1148, after allegedly having seen a vision of the future 112 popes who would reign until the end of the world. By this count, the current Benedict XVI would be 111.

Each of the popes gets a little hint as to his identity. For the most part, Malachy cannily chose to keep them general enough (“angelic shepherd”) that it was hard not to hit a lot of home runs. But good luck in figuring out how Benedict is “glory of the olives.”

Keeping things vague, or subject to multiple interpretations, is the real key to apocalyptic predictions. It’s what made Nostradamus a household name. He’d stare at a bowl of water for hours on end, and then come up with something like:

For the merry maid the bright splendor
Will shine no longer, for long will she be without salt.
With merchants, bullies, wolves odious,
All confusion universal monster.
Which is obviously a foretelling of the Sarah Palin book tour.

My own favorite prognosticator, The Amazing Criswell, always got into trouble with specificity, including his prediction

that a black rainbow would circle the earth in 1999 and suck out all the oxygen. He lost a lot of credibility even earlier, after he announced that the United States would move its capital to Wichita and that pressures from outer space would turn Denver into jelly. Really, people tend to remember stuff like that.

I'm predicting that by the time we reach 2011, the 2012 Web sites will hit the million mark, not to mention the Twitters of Terror. But we've survived end-of-the-world panic many times before.

When I was a kid, the nuns at my school filled us with stories about prophecies of doom, frequently from Our Lady of Fatima. They always revolved around the Communist menace, and we were occasionally sent home on Friday with assurances that the End was coming by Sunday. We were credulous enough not to question why, in that case, there were homework assignments.

Gail Collins

From *The Case for God*

Other European countries were in the throes of the same transformation as Spain, even though at this early stage few were aware of its magnitude. By the sixteenth century, the people of the West had started to create an entirely new and unprecedented type of civilization that depended on a radical change in the economic base of society. Instead of relying, like every premodern economy, on a surplus of agricultural produce with which they could trade in order to fund their cultural achievements, the modern economy rested on the technological replication of resources and the constant reinvestment of capital, which provided a source of wealth that could be renewed indefinitely. This freed it from many of the constraints of premodern societies, where the economy could not expand beyond a certain point and eventually outran its resources. Consequently, these agrarian societies tended to be conservative, because they simply could not afford the constant replication of the infrastructure that has come to characterize modernity. Original thought was not encouraged, because it could lead to frustration and social unrest, since fresh ideas could rarely be implemented and projects that required too large a financial outlay were usually shelved. It seemed preferable, therefore, to concentrate on preserving what had already been achieved. Now, however, Western people were gradually acquiring the confidence to look to the future instead of the past. Where the older cultures had taught men and women to remain within carefully defined limits, pioneers such as Columbus were encouraging them to venture beyond the confines of the known world, where they discovered that, thanks to their modern technology, they not only survived but prospered.

Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), pp. 165-166.

By the sixteenth century, therefore, a complex process was at work in Europe that was slowly changing the way people thought and experienced the world. Inventions were occurring simultaneously in many different fields; none seemed particularly momentous at the time, but their cumulative effect would be decisive. Specialists in one discipline found that they benefited from discoveries made in others. Scientists and explorers, for example, both relied on the increased efficiency of instrument makers. By 1600, innovations were occurring on such a scale and in so many areas at once that progress seemed irreversible and set to continue indefinitely. But in the early sixteenth century, the Great Western Transformation was only in its infancy. Spain may have been the most advanced country in Europe, but it was not the sole model of a modern state. In the course of their struggle against Spanish hegemony, the Netherlands deliberately developed a more liberal ideology to counter Spanish autocracy. There were thus two rival versions of modernity: one open and tolerant, the other exclusive and coercive.

And as society altered to accommodate these developments, religion would also have to change. At this point, faith still pervaded the whole of life and had not yet been confined to a distinct sphere. But secularization was beginning. A centralized state was crucial to productivity and, like Ferdinand and Isabella, rulers all over Europe began the difficult process of welding separate kingdoms into modern nation-states. Princes, such as Henry VII of England (1457-1509) and Francis I of France (1494-1547), adopted policies designed to reduce the influence of the Church and subordinate it to their own political goals. The increasing role of banks, stock companies, and stock exchanges, over which the Church had no control, also eroded its power. This steadily unstoppable trend, which pushed religion into a separate, marginal place in society, would be felt in all kinds of obscure ways that were never fully articulated. Secularization would be accelerated by three crucial and formative sixteenth-century movements: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. These were not disconnected or rival projects. They influenced one another in the same way as the other innovations of the period; all three reflected the emerging early modern zeitgeist and were pervaded by the religious ethos.

Karen Armstrong

From *The Lost Symbol*

Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol*, (New York: Doubleday, 2009), p. 501.

"This is the great gift, Robert, and God is waiting for us to understand it. All around the world, we are gazing skyward, waiting for *God*. . . never realizing that God is waiting for *us*." Katherine paused, letting her words soak in. "We are *creators*,

and yet we naively play the role of 'the *created*.' We see ourselves as helpless sheep buffeted around by the God who made us. We kneel like frightened children, begging for help, for forgiveness, for good luck. But once we realize that we are truly created in the Creator's image, we will start to understand that we, too, must be Creators."

The lost Word is not a word. . . it is a symbol. . . .

Dan Brown

From *Olive Kitteridge*

What young people didn't know, she thought, lying down beside this man, his hand on her shoulder, her arm; oh, what young people did not know. They did not know that lumpy, aged, and wrinkled bodies were as needy as their own young, firm ones, that love was not to be tossed away carelessly, as if it were a tart on a platter with others that got passed around again. No, if love was available, one chose it, or didn't choose it. And if her platter had been full with the goodness of Henry and she had found it burdensome, had flicked it off crumbs at a time, it was because she had not known what one should know: that day after day was unconsciously squandered.

And so, if this man next to her now was not a man she would have chosen before this time, what did it matter? He most likely wouldn't have chosen her either. But here they were, and Olive pictured two slices of Swiss cheese pressed together, such holes they brought to this union—what pieces life took out of you.

Her eyes were closed, and throughout her tired self swept waves of gratitude—and regret. She pictured the sunny room, the sun-washed wall, the bayberry outside. It baffled her, the world. She did not want to leave it yet.

Elizabeth Strout

Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), p. 270.

Critical Background

From Revelation

There is one God who is ultimately in control and who will bring all evil powers, human and otherwise, to account in the great judgment to come. In the meantime, however, these evil powers who know that their time is limited continue to perpetrate evil in this world. For apocalyptic thought, the intensification of evil experienced in the present world is itself an indication that eschatological salvation is near. For the apocalyptists, the suffering of their own times was no random accident or blind fate but part of the plan of God. The persecutions they experienced were part of the necessary struggles of the endtime and revealed that the End was near. Apocalyptists typically did not make speculative predictions of the end of the world at some date centuries hence, which would have been of interest only to futurologists among their contemporaries, but addressed their own generation with the urgency of those who cry out for meaning in their own struggle and suffering. Their question was not "When will the End come?" but "What is the meaning of our suffering?" It was not speculative calculation but the tenacity of faith which came to expression in their conviction that the End must be near.

"In the End, God. . ."

John has already given remarkable expression to the Christian conviction that at the End we meet not an event but a Person (see on 19:11-16 above). All Revelation's statements about the "End" are really statements about God; eschatology is an aspect of the doctrine of God. Shining through the varied pictures of "what it will be like" is the conviction which John shares with Paul that at the end of the historical road God will be "all in all" (*panta en pasin*, RSV "everything to everyone," 1 Cor. 15:28). For John, God is not finally one "item" in the new Jerusalem; God is himself the eschatological reality who embraces all things. In 21:3 a voice interprets the descending city as "God's dwelling with humanity," and declares that "God himself will be with them" (cf. the closing lines of Ezekiel's description of the restored Jerusalem, "The name of the city henceforth shall be 'the Lord is there'" [48:35]). In the only two instances in which the voice of God directly addresses the hearer-readers (21:6, cf 1:8), God declares "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." God does not merely bring the End, God is the End. As a perfect cube (21:15-16), the golden city as a whole is a holy of holies in which the

M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation (Interpretation)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), pp. 43, 215-217.

divine presence is directly, intimately available (I Kings 6:20; II Chron. 3:8-9). Thus in contrast to all pious expectation and the pattern of Ezekiel 40-48 which John is following, there is no temple in this city—because God-as-defined-by-the-Lamb is himself the temple, the “place” of the divine-human encounter (21:22). The jasper wall that surrounds the city is not just another jewel, but the glory of God himself (cf. 4:3, where “jasper” represents God’s glory, and Zech. 2:4-5 on which John is drawing); indeed the city as a whole shines with the divine jasper-glory (21:11). Moses, on the most intimate terms with God (Exod. 34:29-35), never saw God’s face, only his “back-side” (Exod. 33:17-23); but in the new Jerusalem God’s people will see his face (22:4; cf. I Cor. 13:12), and God himself will address them as “my son.” “Son” in biblical parlance is not interchangeable with “child” and should not be sacrificed to contemporary concerns for “inclusive language,” as legitimate as those concerns may be in some respects. “Son” does not connote childish dependence but the freedom of adult personhood (John 8:31-36; Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:1-7) and has echoes of the christological title “Son of God.” What awaits the believer and the world at the End of all things? John’s first and last word is “God.”

*What awaits the believer
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Via Negativa

If to speak of the ultimate future, and therefore the meaning of the present, means to speak of God, how can one speak of God? John has no philosophical interest at all in this abstract question. Since he knows that all our language of God and ultimate things is metaphorical and fragmentary, he is liberated to speak freely his divinely given insights into ultimate reality. Yet he does make some use of that philosophical tradition which claims that, while we cannot say what the transcendent world of God *is*, we can to some extent truly represent it by saying what it is *not*. John thus sprinkles his “description” of the new Jerusalem with affirmations of what will *not* be there.

No sea (21:1). There may be a personal, existential element here. It was in fact the sea that separated John and his beloved communities of anxious Christians. But for the sea, he would be there personally to speak his word of encouragement he must now communicate in writing, and be with them during the great ordeal they must endure. The new world coming will mean the removal of all present barriers to human relationships. Yet “sea” has a deeper meaning in John’s theology than this aspect of his personal circumstance. Throughout Revelation, “sea” has represented the chaotic power of un-creation, anti-creation, the abyssmal depth from which the dragon arises to torment the earth, the very opposite of the creator God (cf. commentary on 13:1 and 4:6 above). Driven back at creation and held at bay during aeons of history, in the

new creation “sea” will vanish forever. Evil, even as a potential disturber of creation, will have been irrevocably overcome.

No tears, death, sorrow, crying, pain (21:4). Although philosophical arguments for the character-building value of these built-in afflictions of the human condition can be made, John is not writing philosophy. He is the prophetic mediator of the word of that One who declares that the “former things” (with this one phrase he sums up all the world’s misery of all the ages) have “passed away,” because he makes all things new. Here the Almighty himself promises that all that now robs life from being fulfilled, joyful, vibrant *life* will be absent from the transcendent reality to which he is leading history.

M. Eugene Boring