“What do you think, Pastor? Are the end times coming soon?”

I was walking around our All Saints campus this week when a member of our community asked me this question?

“What do you think, Pastor? Are the end times coming soon?”

And I stopped for a second and I said, “You know … I don’t think so.

“But it sure would be nice if they were.”

Now, he shot me a weird look … and maybe that’s how you’re looking at me on your screen right now.

Why would I hope the end times are coming soon?

I’ll tell you why … because it’s going to be amazing.

Now, we hardly ever talk about the end times … and I understand why. Conservative churches, particularly conservative evangelical churches, have so effectively used the concept of the end times as a weapon of fear and tool for imposing a narrow moralism that we and our more progressive fellow walkers with the revolutionary Jesus have developed a sort of theological trauma response to any mention of it.

That’s why it’s important actually to read our scriptures.

Do you know what the Book of Revelation says about the end times? I mean, the *very* end times? It’s not fire and brimstone coming down from the skies. Rivers and seas boiling. Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together … mass hysteria!

The poetry of the end times in Revelation … and it *is* poetry and imagery, not a literal prediction -- is a city whose gates will never be shut. With a river of life flowing through it and leaves on the trees for the healing of the nations. All human endeavor is gathered up. Nothing is wasted. All is blessed.

All that other stuff … lakes of fire and volcanoes and persecutions .. all the misery. That’s all on this side of it.

And that city and that river and those trees with the healing leaves … those aren’t off somewhere else in heaven. Somewhere where the righteous will somehow get raptured away to. It’s right here.

It’s what should be.

It’s what can be.

It’s what we hope and trust and believe will be.

One of the gravest mistakes we as the progressive church continue to make is ceding this ground of eschatology. We’ve done it so much you might not even know that word. Eschatology is the study of what happens at “the eschaton” … the final event at the end of all things. And we have become either so damaged through our experience of this being weaponized against us or so fearful of guilt by association with its toxic theology and science denial that we avoid the topic at all costs.

Now there are at least two huge problems with that.

The first is that our scripture and our faith tells us that what happens at the end … is wonderful.

Here’s a hint. The end times are also called “the Great Consummation.” You know where else we use that word? Consummation? In intimate relationship. Consummation of a mutually loving intimate relationship with enthusiastic consent is not a bad thing. It is awesome. It is “Damn, give me more of that!” time.

Dr. King famously said, “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” That’s eschatology! It’s when we arrive at that place of perfect justice. Perfect love. Perfect joy.

We heard that distant song of justice, joy and love this week … and we hear it this morning.

One of the Hebrew scripture readings Dr. Gafney’s woman’s lectionary gives us this morning is from Zephaniah. Zephaniah is what is called a minor prophet … and in fact the Book of Zephaniah is only 53 verses long.

Now the first 46 verses are about what has been and what is. All the ways we have gone wrong … wounded each other and grieved the heart of God. It’s about the consequences of those actions. How hurt people … hurt … people. It’s about all the ways we look around us and know things are so messed up and that there is going to be even more suffering before its through. Not because God is vengeful but because actions have consequences.

Through our 21st century eyes, Zephaniah reminds us that the damage we have done and are doing to this planet will have dire consequences even if we get our act together right now.

Through our 21st century eyes, Zephaniah reminds us that our genocide and colonization of native civilizations and our kidnapping and torture of African civilizations will continue to have traumatic consequences even if we get our act together right now.

Through our 21st century eyes, Zephaniah reminds us that our erasure and abuse of women, and LGBTQ images of God will continue to have traumatic consequences even if we get our act together right now.

Trauma does not heal with the wave of a hand, the snap of a finger or a signature on an Executive Order. Through our 21st century eyes, the first 46 verses of Zephaniah remind us what we all know if we look around this world with open, honest eyes and that is we have dug ourselves a huge hole … not for the past four years but for the past 400 years and more … and there will be consequences for that for us and for our children and our children’s children. Again, not because God is vengeful but because actions have consequences.

The first 46 verses of Zephaniah remind us of what, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we know all too well. And then comes the next verse …. and the next … which we hear today.

*Sing aloud daughter of Zion; shout, all ye Israel!*

*Rejoice daughter and exult with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem!*

*The Judge of all Flesh has taken away the judgments against you,*

*and has turned away your enemies, daughter.*

*The sovereign of Israel, Creator of the Heavens and Earth,*

*is in your midst daughter; no longer shall you fear evil.*

Through the prophet Zephaniah, even as the people are still facing the consequences of the damage they have done, God is giving them -- and us -- a blessed gift of a glimpse of the destiny that lies beyond.

God is giving them – and us – the blessed gift of hope. A hope that is not ethereal and vague but vivid and real. A vision we can imagine and hold in our hearts. A destination to steer toward and an image to keep us going when all other hope seems lost.

God is giving them – and us --- the blessed gift not just of saying “it gets better” … but “THIS is what it will look like. This is what it will feel like. THIS is what it will BE like when it does.”

And so, the other huge problem with us ignoring eschatology is not only that it is absolutely wonderful … but that we need it.

We need that glimpse of how things can be. We need to get up on top of that mountain and catch even a distant glimpse of the promised land … even if we know we’ve got thousands of miles of valley and desert to go before we get there.

Political scientist Gene Sharp wrote about how the most important starting point in any movement for revolutionary change is having what he called our “vision of tomorrow.” That’s because it’s not enough to dismantle what is death-producing … because then we are left with void. We have to have a vision for what will be built.

Our friend Andre Henry writes this about Sharp’s call for us to be visionaries of tomorrow if we hope to be revolutionaries for love today.

He writes: “We start by envisioning the end, because we can’t build what we can’t imagine.”

We start with the end times … that’s why eschatology is so important. We start with the end times … we start with the vision knowing that, as Andre writes: “thinking of what the world could be will naturally reveal what the world is not.

We start with the end times … with the vision of tomorrow … and with that vision on our hearts, we can look around and say, “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

With that vision on our hearts, we can ask questions not just of how things are but why things are.

Last spring, Bishop Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows preached an amazing sermon as Deon Johnson became Bishop of Missouri. She talked about the new story that we as the church have the opportunity to write. About that vision of tomorrow, that glimpse of the eschaton. She used the Easter texts and preached:

*“Jesus burst out of the tomb and calls us to live out of the story that proclaims that when things look utterly desolate and defeated, God changes the ending and makes all things new. A story that reveals that especially when it looks like … wickedness and death will prevail, or when it looks like having hope is pointless that God can transform anything—anyone—and we are now different. That is our story!”*

Bishop Jennifer laid out that vision of tomorrow, filled us with hope, gave us that glimpse from the mountaintop … and then she reminded us that to get there … to reach that heavenly consummation … to write that new story, first we have to tell the whole story.

With that vision of tomorrow on our hearts, we then must look around and be honest not just about how things are but how they got this way.

I walk on our church campus and know that I am walking on ground that the Tongva nation was killed for and deported from. It’s not enough to have a PACES process that imagines what God dreams for this space … we have to tell the whole story of how we got here in the first place.

I look at the huge stained glass window in the apse of our beautiful church building and know that for generations the visual focal point for worship at All Saints Church has been a white woman whose money came from tobacco, from labor tortured out of enslaved black bodies. It’s not enough to imagine a new window in that space … we have to tell the whole story of how that window got there.

I drive by St. Barnabas Church on North Fair Oaks and know that its birth story is a tale of black people not being allowed to worship at All Saints Church. We can and we must imagine a new Beloved Community in our own church and with St. Barnabas … and we have to tell the whole story of how we got this way.

“Telling the whole story,” Bishop Jennifer preached. “Telling the whole story will help heal this country and strengthen our witness as followers of Jesus.”

That’s right, like David Byrne we must ask ourselves “Well, how did we get here?

What is that beautiful house?

Where does that highway go to?

Am I right? Am I wrong?

And we may say to ourselves, “My God! What have I done!”

Dr. King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and laid out his vision of tomorrow. He sang out:

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!”

King’s “I have a dream” has been parroted and etched in stones for the past 57 years. And yet, in the prophetic words of the Rev. Dr. Gayle Fisher-Stewart at last weekend’s diocesan MLK service it remains little more than “a dead man’s dream.”

It remains little more than a dead man’s dream because we have not done the work of telling the whole story so we can write a new story.

And while the vision of tomorrow is the most important starting point for God’s revolution of love, telling the whole story is the necessary next step … or the dream will stay a dream and nothing more.

Dr. Fisher-Stewart reminded us that the last Sunday sermon Dr. King preached was called “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.” King talked about the story of Rip Van Winkle, and said:

“The most striking thing … is not merely that Rip slept 20 years, but that he slept through a revolution.… And one of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution.”

Dr. Fisher-Stewart reminded us last weekend that the reason Dr. King’s vision is little more than a dead man’s dream today is that we have spent the past 57 years sleeping through what could have been a revolution.

Dr. King had the dream. The prophet gave us the vision of tomorrow … but we failed to tell the whole story so we can write a new story. We slept through the revolution – and so the revolution still hasn’t happened. Dr. King’s dream is dead. It is little more than an artifact, a “dead man’s dream.”

Now that’s not what is supposed to happen with visions. You don’t hear stories in scripture of someone receiving a vision and then going back to sleep. Vision is supposed to lead to action. But we took the vision, and then we went back to sleep. We need the vision. We need to imagine what God dreams for us. And Dr. King and many others gave that to us … but we have not grasped it and made it our own. We have not told the whole story so we can write a new story. And so, we find ourselves still parroting hollow words of a dead man’s dream.

And yet, God is good. Yes, all the time, God is good. Because God’s dreams never die. God is relentless. She keeps giving us her vision for our future … generation after generation after generation.

Whenever we are at the point of despair, God will take us up on the mountaintop and give us a glimpse of what can be, what should be and what one day will be.

And that’s what we got a glimpse of this week. After four years of the bleakest, most toxic, most loveless elements of our common life finding face and voice in the White House, the sun broke out Wednesday morning and we caught a glimpse from the mountaintop. Not so much from a new President, but from a young black woman named Amanda Gorman in a poem, prophetically and appropriately titled for a mountaintop vision: “The Hill We Climb.”

Amanda stood on the mountaintop and told us what she saw. Like the prophet she is, she painted for us a vision of tomorrow.

She proclaimed:

*We will not march back to what was,  
But move to what shall be,  
A country that is bruised but whole,  
Benevolent but bold,  
Fierce and free.*

This week, we got a glimpse from the mountaintop. And it is not only natural that we should take a moment, and pause, and rest, and bask in the glow of this vision of tomorrow – it is necessary.

It has been a long four years, it has been a long four hundred years … and we have earned, we desperately need a moment, even just a moment … to breathe. And to dream. And to live in that place of hope.

To go to bed at night and not worry when we wake up in the morning what abomination our president has spouted on Twitter while we were asleep.

To not worry every time we look at news that there is someone new we love who is in our government’s crosshairs.

It is good and right and necessary for us to pause in this moment and breathe … and let this vision of tomorrow wash over us and flow through us. To let it strengthen our weary bones and calm our anxious hearts.

And … we need to remember that though it is good and right that we rest for a time, that dreams do not become reality by themselves.

Because Amanda did not stop there. Because it is not enough to have the vision. It is not enough to say I have a dream. We have been here before. We have to wake up, and with that vision on our hearts, tell the whole story and then write a new one.

And so Amanda continued,

*We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation  
Because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens.*

*But* … she continued

*But one thing is certain:  
If we merge mercy with might and might with right,  
Then love becomes our legacy  
And change our children’s birthright.*

The end times are coming. And they are wonderful.

This week, this day, we catch a glimpse. And let us rest in that glimpse. Let it make our spirits glad and hopeful. Let it bring healing tears to our eyes and joy to our hearts.

“We start by envisioning the end, because we can’t build what we can’t imagine.”

And … it is not enough to glimpse the future. We must love it into being.

Let us not sleep through another revolution.

Let us tell the whole story so we can write a new story.

We have seen the vision. A new dawn is breaking.

And ..

*When day comes we step out of the shade,  
Aflame and unafraid.  
The new dawn blooms as we free it.  
For there is always light if only we’re brave enough to see it,  
If only we’re brave enough to be it.*

AMEN.