

Matt. 24:3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: 8 all this is but the beginning of the birthpangs. . . :36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

A couple weeks ago I had a long road trip to make in one day, to Madison, Wisconsin, and with my usual talent for leaving home early, I managed to get on the road about 4:30 in the afternoon, which just made the drive ahead seem that much longer. Realizing that I would be driving hours after midnight, I stopped around eight pm at Barnes & Noble in Bloomington, Illinois, to fortify my soul with some new compact discs for the next 250 miles. Really, not so much to fortify my soul as in the hope of keeping myself awake while I drove. I didn't give a great deal of thought to the CDs beforehand. I grabbed a couple groups I thought I liked, but I didn't do my usual cautious listening to sample tracks over the course of several weeks. What was on those CDs was going to be a surprise to me, which was exactly how I expected them to keep me awake. Therefore I was taken completely unaware when, somewhere in the middle of Illinois headed north on a dark road I'd never traveled before, I heard a song of my youth, remade, a song I hadn't heard in 20 years. I was awestruck by how well it held up. It was kind of like running across an old college classmate and noticing that he hadn't turned gray or gained weight and his face was unwrinkled. The song sounded different—the band which released it in 2001 sang it

with a different meter, and used different instruments—but the meaning hadn't changed at all, and that was the real attention-getter.

So, anyway, this is the song:

Statistically speaking, my guess is that not many of you remember what it was like to be in college in the first half of the 1980s. What I'm thinking of especially is how often it seemed to be such a pointless exercise to prepare for the future, because it seemed ever more likely that the world was not going to live long enough for you to enter the future you kept preparing yourself for. Maybe the future always seems that threatening when you're getting ready to step out on your own, but there were all these external signs, all these hints that we were coming closer and closer to an apocalyptic world war. The Union of Atomic Scientists moved the hands of their doomsday clock two minutes closer to midnight in 1980, three minutes closer in 1981, and another minute closer in 1984, while the United States and the Soviet Union continued to add to their supply of nuclear weapons and took increasingly angry positions about which nation needed to stop first.

Somewhere around 1983, the term nuclear winter moved out from the shelter of scientific debate and into common usage, largely by way of a television movie that turned into a really big deal. *The Day After* was set in Lawrence, Kansas, and portrayed in intricate detail what nuclear war might look like, and the nuclear winter following the war. The movie was so realistic, in fact, that ABC was not allowed to use the Defense Department's standard stock footage of mushroom clouds, and the director had to use special effects to try to recreate the image. No sponsors would buy commercial time after the point in the movie where the nuclear missiles were launched, so the last half of the show aired without any commercials at all, which was maybe enough all by itself to raise everyone's adrenaline level. In the news coverage

after the movie Cornell scientist Carl Sagan made his famous remark comparing the arms race to "two men standing waist deep in gasoline; one with three matches, the other with five".

There were other voices, of course, not necessarily comforting ones, but at least voices which recognized that the two superpowers were playing a game which would have no winners. In 1985, the group International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War won the Nobel Peace Prize for their work in pointing out that nuclear weapons were a threat to public health everywhere. A number of religious organizations made statements against the arms race in the early 80s, in particular the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. It doesn't really make news if the Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren and the Religious Society of Friends make statements against the arms race, because, you know, those fringe groups are always against war, but it does make news when a bunch of Catholic bishops remind a nation that they, also, are against most war, and that, come to think of it, they couldn't really regard a nuclear war as a moral one. It seemed like a mild statement to me, but it apparently caught the attention of military scholars, who responded with their own arguments about how and why a nuclear war could be just as moral an undertaking as any other war.

So then, in the middle of all that, there was Bruce Cockburn, with his song "Lovers in a Dangerous Time," 1984. It perfectly caught the perplexity of trying to deal with the end of the world and the beginning of love all in the same body. And although I didn't know the phrase yet, Bruce Cockburn came along at just the right time to point out to me that we chronically live in the now-but-not-yet kingdom of God--a world largely under the control of corrupt systems which use their power for their own perpetuation and gain, but that at certain moments even in the midst of these fallen principalities and powers, the kingdom of God can break through and we can live in it now, in this world--for a moment, or an hour, or a day, or even months. And one of the ways in which the kingdom breaks through is in any true expression

of love, erotic love as well as agape love. And another way the kingdom breaks through is in the reception of joy.

Anyway, there I am in the middle of Illinois in the dark, remembering 1983, and realizing that Bruce Cockburn could have written the song in 2001, or in 2006, for that matter. And remembering the small apocalyptic passages from the gospels. Because Jesus and his friends lived in a time that didn't look so different to them than our time looks to us. The weaponry was different, but the commitment to killing in the name of national security was the same. In fact, within 40 years of Jesus' ministry and death, the entire city of Jerusalem had been reduced to smoking rubble.

So when Jesus' disciples ask him about the end of the age, as far as we can tell, it's not just some vague hope of heaven they're wondering about. They are asking because they really expect the end of the world to come, in their own lifetime--and so does Jesus. But what he tells them is--"there will always be wars and rumors of wars. No one knows which one will be the last one--that's beyond even my ability to know. So don't focus on disaster and destruction. The best way to know what you need to know is by focussing on God's kingdom. Look for where you see the kingdom growing. And be ready to align yourself with God."

Pretty similar, really, to Bruce Cockburn's message--which shouldn't be too surprising, since Bruce Cockburn learned it from Jesus.

This past week I went up to the Earlham School of Religion for the annual Pastors Conference. We were trying to talk about the ways that the work of a pastor connects with and doesn't connect with the work of shalom--the work of establishing right relationships. At some point we wound up talking about the danger of working for shalom, in the sense that working towards a fair relationship among people and nations is often not going to make you popular and well-liked. The problem, we said, is that Christianity is and always has been subversive, which

means against the dominant form. To believe that the world is not divided into big people and little people--people we care about and people we don't have to care about--this has always gone against the grain. And to act on that belief, by loving our enemies, is more subversive yet.

I believe that's true. But on my way home I started to think that maybe we still hadn't gone far enough. I began to wonder if it's not just love for our enemies which is subversive, but any kind of love. And even any kind of joy. Because to feel those things, to act those ways, is to feel God's creative power, to become aligned with God's own love for all the creation.

I think we live, really, in a world which is far more in awe of death than of life. We feel that death has more power than life. That's why we're so frightened of it. That's why we're so willing to dispense with other lives to preserve our own. That's why it becomes subversive to let ourselves feel the power of life.

So Bruce Cockburn was on to something when he tied the sky falling and the tenderness of our bodies together. The one is directly opposed to the other. And even as there is necessary work for shalom, work for justice and reconciliation which involves political action and economic structures and social changes, there is also another work that runs alongside and beneath the first, which is the work of truly loving the world that God has created. Which is the deeply subversive work of discovering joy and feeling love. Or, as the poet Mary Oliver puts it, "let me keep my mind on what matters, which is my work, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Oliver, "Messenger", from *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).