

There's a man who lives in the country outside of Danville who doesn't have a car. I see him sometimes walking into town to the grocery store or library, so I've been stopping to give him a ride. Ministers love doing this, because it gives us a captive audience. So I've been giving him rides, but he's starting to drive me crazy because he's a few biscuits short of a breakfast religion-wise. Except now I feel I have to stop for him since he knows my car and I don't want to hurt his feeling by not stopping.

The other day I went to the library and there he was. He came over to me and said, "What do you think of the book of Revelation?" By the way he asked, I knew he thought it was the most important book in the Bible, and that he really didn't care what I thought about it, he just wanted the opportunity to tell me what he thought about it.

But I told him I thought the book of Revelation, like all apocalyptic literature, was written during a time of intense persecution and dangerous bitter division, when the people of faith had lost hope and needed to support and strengthen one another. So that culture's storytellers got to work telling and writing epic stories, many of them battle stories of good vs. evil, and the ultimate triumph of God and good. I even quoted, from memory mind you, a portion of the 21st chapter of the book of Revelation.

“Behold, the dwelling of God is with mankind. God will dwell with them; She will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

I was preaching, right there in the Danville Public Library.

He said, “So you don’t think the book of Revelation is about America and Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump?”

I said, “Let me explain something. The author of the book of Revelation believed the world was flat, conceived of no world beyond Rome, had never heard of America, so was certainly unfamiliar with the American political landscape. It was a story written to give hope to first-century Christians, though we today can certainly be encouraged by its proclamation of hope in the ultimate power of good.”

He said, “I’ve been reading it. I think the world is going to end next week.” He was very serious.

But then he went to the reference desk to ask about a book. The librarian looked it up on her computer and said, “It’s been checked out and won’t be returned for another two weeks.”

He said, “That’s fine. I can wait.”

No one has the courage of their convictions anymore.

So are we living in the end times? I don’t think so.

In fact, I think just the opposite is true. I believe we are living in the start times, the birth times.

I believe the challenges and divisions and rancor of these days are the birth pains of a new nation, and eventually a new world. I believe we are in the death throes of an old way of living with one another, and are entering a new way of life with each other. And that old way of living is putting up a fight. It has, metaphorically and literally, its water cannons and attack dogs and rubber bullets and concussion grenades and it is putting up a fight. Because it knows a new way of life is coming and that old way is frightened. Just like Rome was frightened when God raised up a new community around Jesus, and people were being drawn to that way, encouraged and empowered by that way. And all Rome could do, with its vast army and political reach, was watch, helpless, while its people slipped away one by one to join the new way.

So that's what the book of Revelation is about. We're not living in the end times. We're living in the start times. Something new is being born, and we're feeling the birth pains. This will be no easy delivery. A friend of mine had a baby in the car on the way to the hospital. Her infant came that quickly. But this won't be like that. The dwelling of God that is being born in these start times isn't going to happen by next week. We're going to be walking the floors, helping this new life along. This is a big baby. It's so big, it may not even arrive in our lifetimes, in fact, it probably won't. But make no mistake, it's coming. We're living in the start times.

How do we live in the start times? We know how to live in the end times. We've read the books and seen the movies. We get all suspicious and afraid, so go buy a gun and store up a bunch of food and water, and buy big stout locks for our doors, then barricade ourselves in the basement, and don't let anyone in. That's how we live in the end times.

But how do we live in the start times? We do just the opposite. We beat our guns into ploughshares. We share our food, share our water, open our doors, and make everyone our friend. That's how we give birth to the dwelling of God.

When we live in the start times, when we're assisting with the delivery of the dwelling of God among us, we remember to laugh, to poke a little fun, at ourselves, and every now and then at our leaders. It will either keep them humble and make them better leaders, or it will drive them crazy and they'll abdicate their thrones. Either way, we win.

When we live in the start times, we remember that when God was painting humanity, he used the full palate of colors. So we treat all people, all races, as God's artwork and delight in them. We live as God created us to live, with dignity, with compassion, with a high regard for creation, with an unflinching dedication to liberty and justice for all.

When we live in the start times, we remember that fear, anger, and greed were weapons of the old ways of living, but in this new way of being we will live with hope, forgiveness, and generosity.

Isn't it exciting to be living in the start times!

Whenever something new is being born, when something is still in its embryonic state, God raises up prophets to let us know the community she envisions. Those prophets are often folks whose ancestors suffered greatly at the hands of the old way, because those are the people hungering for a new way of being. So it was the poet Maya Angelou who captured the character of these start times when she said, "We are all at once both a composition and a composer. We have the ability not only to compose the future of our own lives, but to help compose the future of everyone around us and the communities in which we live."

Now we all know that new communities, new ways of living, need new songs to sing. So I ask you people of Jesus, you sons and daughters of the Most High, will your life be a dirge or a song? A lament or an angel choir? What kind of song, what kind of life, will you compose?