


Discussed: Serbian forces, New Guinea students, flowers, imagination, hard work,
the Rapture, justice, literary traditions, remembering

Adventism's Apocalyptic Hope

By Kendra Haloviak



Ten years ago, on July 9, 1995, Serbian forces went into the Bosnian city of Srebrenica, rounded up more than seven thousand Muslim men and boys, and killed them. One of the men who died that day was the husband of Camila Omanovic. Camila called him “my beloved Ahmet.” Facing rape, torture, and death, Camila tried to hang herself. However, two boys discovered her, quickly got help, and saved her life. After all these years, Camila has decided to return to her town. She now works in the same building where she tried to hang herself.

An article in the *New York Times* recounting this part of Camila’s story called her “a woman transformed.” Many and complex emotions and realities brought Camila back to her town, including a job offer as bookkeeper at the memorial for Srebrenica’s dead. In the article she is quoted as saying: “I would like the town to be like it used to be.”

Living on a street of mostly abandoned houses, Camila and eight other Muslim widows have begun planting flowers. The article says: “The women have restarted a competition from before the war that honors Srebrenica’s most beautiful garden. Amid the abandoned houses of the dead, pockets of carefully nurtured red roses, white lilies

and yellow carnations bloom.”

Camila Omanovic’s story highlights several aspects of hope I will explore in this article. First, hope imagines newness. Camila imagines her town of the future teeming with children, and laughter, and all the stuff of daily life, even garden competitions.

Second, hope remembers. Camila’s work at the memorial shows a deep value of memory. Although hers is a focus on the future, she also remembers. She remembers the violence and the horrible loss. She remembers her “beloved Ahmet.”

Adventism’s Second Advent Hope imagines newness, remembers the past, and moves us to transform the world.

Third, hope moves people to begin the hard work of transformation. Camila’s hope for the future and honesty about the past motivate her to rebuild a life and plant beautiful gardens, places where red roses, white lilies, and yellow carnations bloom.

The best of Adventism’s Second Advent Hope contains these same characteristics of hope on a global scale. Our Second Advent Hope imagines newness: nations at peace; cities that are safe; a new earth without global warming; hurricanes, and tsunamis; a new earth rich with plenty for all; new, strong bodies in place of old, tired ones; wounds of all kinds healed.

Our Second Advent Hope also remembers the stories and songs of long ago; remembers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel; remembers Amos’s call to establish justice at the gate, and Luke’s blessing to the world’s poor: yours is the kingdom of God; remembers slavery and exile; and remembers freedom and homecoming.

Our Second Advent Hope also moves us to transform the world: to send missionaries around the globe; to provide whole communities with health care; to establish a worldwide educational system; to change public policies; to challenge unjust systems.

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Adventism has long found its Second Advent Hope message in the pages of the Bible’s apocalyptic works—the book of Daniel, whose second half is apocalyptic, and the book of Revelation, the Christian canon’s only book-length apocalypse.

This article invites us to notice these aspects of the Second Advent Hope through the experiences of worship in the book of Revelation. As worship, Revelation imagines newness, remembers the past, and moves us to transform our world.

Apocalyptic Hope Imagines Newness

Hope is a vision of what can be, the ability to imagine something new, to imagine a better future.

Henri Nouwen, in his work *Creative Ministry*, says

that hope is *not* a form of wish-fulfillment, a “waiting for a Santa Claus whose task it is to satisfy very specific needs and desires, [and] if possible, immediately” (79). Neither is hope optimism. To reduce hope to positive thinking is to misunderstand hope.

Recently, I read the work the *Anatomy of Hope* by Jerome Groopman, a hematologist-oncologist. Groopman is currently a professor at Harvard Medical School. Groopman studies hope in people struggling with very serious health problems. He suggests that hope is the ability of a patient to imagine a better future; to realize that there exists an openness to life...an uncertainty that allows for possibility, newness, hope. Groopman states: “Because nothing is absolutely determined, there is not only reason to fear but also reason to hope” (210–11).

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann would emphasize that life contains this aspect of hope, that is, the possibility of newness because of the character of God. Yahweh is a God of possibility and newness. Yahweh is unpredictable! Surprising! Mysterious! Free! Uncontrollable! To use Brueggemann’s phrase, Yahweh is an “alternative-generating God.” Israel could hope, could imagine a better future, because of the character of Yahweh as complex, holy, surprising, new.

This is one of the reasons some current popular views of biblical apocalyptic have it all wrong, and Adventism must not slide into such theology. I am



speaking of fundamentalist Christian interpretations of Revelation like the popular *Left Behind* series, whose theology influences some of the leaders of the United States at the highest levels of government.

Most Adventists are not seduced by the concept of the Rapture. However, do Adventist preachers and Revelation seminar evangelists buy into a similar view of God and the future? Have we reduced a biblical view of the God of possibilities and newness to a God of predictions? Are we approaching the texts in a cut-and-paste way, piecing together a puzzle or code that tells us how to escape tribulation (we prefer, Time of Trouble), which is the violence God sends upon those who disagree with God? Or, do we hold the texts, in all their complexity, as glimpses into God's grandeur? As poems of praise?

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

Great and amazing are your deeds,
Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
King of the nations!
Lord, who will not fear
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy. (Rev. 15:2-4a)

The Rapture is about escaping from this world, a place that will only get more violent as the Advent of God nears. Have Adventists embraced a similar view? Or do we read Revelation as engagement with the world, imagining a better future on earth, ultimately ushered in by a nonviolent God who refuses to leave people behind, but instead comes to dwell with them?!

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be God's people,
and God himself will be with them. (Rev 21:3)

Will Jerusalem be a place of war and violence, as predicted in the approach to Revelation as a blueprint of human history? Or is "Jerusalem" a place of

welcoming and healing; where the gates of the city are left open; where there is no temple, for God is there; where the leaves of the Tree of Life are for the healing of the nations? In short, are our readings of Revelation experiences of horrifying imagination or hopeful imagination?

Adventists often pity our Christian brothers and sisters who embrace the Rapture. But have many of us reduced the God of Scripture, the God of unlimited possibilities, to a God whose hands are tied until all prophecies are fulfilled? States Barbara Rossing in her book, *The Rapture Exposed*: "God does not follow a script!" (90). The narrative of the book of Revelation contains a God who will not be limited, predictable, or even confined to any one time!

In Revelation, God is present and anticipated, past and future. God is sender of letters and resurrected Lord, on a throne in the heavens and with humanity on earth. God is slaughtered and standing, attentive to slaughtered people and furious at the violence that killed them. God is protective of people and eager to receive praise from them. God gives insight and holds back information. God reigns now and eternally. God warns and pleads and promises and demands. God destroys and restores. Far from predictable, this complex God is especially revealed in the hymns found in Revelation's many worship scenes.

The hymns contain elements of prophetic literature—where God is depicted as agonizing with Israel, pleading for people to turn from their evil ways and embrace a future of justice and peace. The hymns are also included within an apocalyptic text—where, typically, God is portrayed as far removed from the human experience, holy, separate. And the hymns reflect the Christian liturgical tradition—where the incarnate God of Jesus remains with humanity through the Spirit in the context of worship.

The various genres or literary traditions found in Revelation remain in conversation with each other; one does not dominate or take over. And there is no resolution of the tension. Instead, God remains portrayed as one who simultaneously agonizes, is holy, and is present with people.

Thus, the hymns of Revelation underscore the complexity of the One seated on the Throne. Humanity praises a God who has come before; a God of the present, and of the future. This is a God who cannot be confined in space or time. Revelation's portrait is of a God of newness, of possibilities: a God of hope.

We can imagine a better future, we can hope, because of a God of possibilities and newness.

The One who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (Rev. 21:5a)

Apocalyptic Hope Remembers

For me, Groopman's best insight into the relationship between hope and health is that authentic hope imagines a better future without ignoring the struggles, that is, without denial of the past, without memory loss. In fact, he explores how both denial and memory loss destroy hope. States Groopman:

Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see—in the mind's eye—a path to a better future. Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along the path. True hope has no room for delusion. Clear-eyed, hope gives us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them. (xiv)

Groopman is clear: ignorance is not bliss. False hope is not hope at all. It is an illusion. Instead, the truth about our physical situation must be stated. Then, and only then, is hope possible. Hope means that we do not forget the horrors of Srebrenica, and Rwanda, and Auschwitz. Hope means that we look them squarely in the eye, we speak the truth about the horrors. Such honest remembering sets the stage for hope.

The Greek word *apocalypse* translated into English as revelation means "revealing" or "unveiling," a pulling back to make it possible to see things as they really are. Like Groopman's insights, apocalyptic hope also proclaims "away with illusions!" No more deception! To be serious about hope is to tell the truth.

Revelation tells the truth. It is honest about the problems in the world. In fact, at times, it is brutally honest in its language, to the point of causing some readers to turn the page quickly, or to return to the Gospel accounts. Even Paul is better than this!

We must admit that such scenes of terror and destruction are present in this work and other works of Scripture. What do we do with them? How do we understand the scenes of judgment and destruction? How do we interpret these passages for today, in our present contexts?

I love the introduction to Phyllis Tribble's book,

Texts of Terror. An Old Testament scholar, Tribble talks about her struggle with biblical passages that involve violence against women. In her introduction, Tribble talks about her journey with these texts as similar to Jacob's experience of wrestling with the angel. Like Jacob, Tribble refuses to let them go until they bless her, even if it means leaving with a limp.

If we are serious about the Apocalypse, neglecting certain sections will not do. Neither will simple answers to our questions of violence and destruction. We must wrestle until we are blessed, even if we leave with a limp.

Hope remembers Egypt—the place of slavery, and Babylon—the place of exile. Hope remembers wilderness experiences, and moments when we cry out: "How long, O Lord?" The book of Revelation remembers, and in doing so, reveals both the ways of God and the ways of evil.

Satan's kingdom, beast powers, Babylon, whichever image we want to use, is brutally violent, oppressive, coercive, and...defeated. It is crumbling as we speak, imploding, self-destructing. It is portrayed as a system that ultimately turns against its own adherents. It uses the Harlot, sleeps with her, uses her to make money, then devours her flesh and burns her alive. It oppresses people, placing goods of gold and silver and even types of wood, above human lives. It forces allegiance and worship, loyalty through threatened starvation.

Revelation reveals the ways of evil. It doesn't hide the painful from our sight. It doesn't hold back the horror, but exposes evil. And then it lets us choose.

Another insight from Groopman's study is that hope that is honest in its remembering tempers fear. Bruce Springsteen's recently released album, *Devils and Dust*, contains his hit song of that same title. As I understand the song, Springsteen incorporates images from the point of view of American soldiers in Iraq.

We've got God on our side
We're just trying to survive
What if what you do to survive
kills the things you love
Fear's a powerful thing

Fear is a powerful and dangerous thing. It causes us to kill the very things we love. Consider so many of



the United States' decisions since 9/11. But hope that is honest in its remembering "tempers fear" (199). Hope imagines a better future, even while it recognizes risks and threats. Hope "brings reality into sharp focus" (198) and has the fortitude to resist fear, to imagine alternatives to bombs and guns.

In August, I was in Australia, in the midst of a speaking tour that concluded in Papua New Guinea. After hearing a variety of people tell me about the dangers of New Guinea, I was really afraid. In fact, I can't remember being more afraid of something I was planning to do (unlike our quick moments of fear that are quickly resolved).

As I wrestled with the decision of whether or not I should follow through with my plans, I kept thinking over and over again of the generations of Adventist missionaries whose embrace of the Blessed Hope moved them to do amazingly courageous acts in places that, for them, were strange and often unwelcoming.

I found that same spirit among the missionaries of New Guinea. Their lack of fear in the face of so many things was astounding. It was surpassed only by the courage of the students and staff from New Guinea who enthusiastically give their lives to sharing the gospel in a place where such commitment is not always appreciated by family and village.

All week I listened to the students' stories. I spent my last Sabbath afternoon there listening to theology majors share their experiences in ministry and evangelism during their recent term break. They had gone in groups of four or five all over the country to share the Good News with people.

That evening, as some of the theology majors—about fifteen men and two women—gathered for a short meeting in the sanctuary, I heard myself expressing gratitude for their testimonies and for the hope that they gave me for the Church. I had not thought of saying it. I did not need to say it. I was not being asked to talk with them. I did not realize I was emotional until I began the sentence, then I could hardly finish it. "You give me hope for the future of my church," I said with tears in my eyes.

As I reflect on that experience with the help of Groopman and Brueggemann and the book of Revelation, I realize that the students at Pacific Adventist University give me hope because they helped me imagine/see a future for our church that is better than the present. These are women and men studying and serv-

ing together, improving people's lives. The students also give me hope because they deeply value memory. They value their own stories, the stories of Scripture, and the stories we share as Adventist believers.

Hope looks in two directions: forward to a better future and back to one's heritage, to the resources of one's faith.

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice, saying:

"Salvation belongs to our God
who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"
(Rev. 7:9–10)

Apocalyptic Hope Moves Us to Transform the World

The third aspect of hope to be considered is its ability to motivate humans to begin the hard work of transformation. Apocalyptic hope is not content with the transformation of an individual or a village. Apocalyptic hope is about transforming the world!

Apocalyptic hope thinks big. It motivates the work of transformation on a grand scale, of the entire cosmos! Apocalyptic hope claims that even dead people will be transformed into living people. Nations will be transformed into communities at peace. Nature will be transformed into places of prosperity and plenty. The entire world will be made new!

Biblical apocalyptic hope is newness in a big way. Such a vision moves those who enter its worship scenes to transform the world!

I am a fan of the television show *The West Wing*. One of the reasons is its hopefulness. The writers of the show believe it is possible for government to make people's lives better. It is honest about huge obstacles: challenges to good government, necessary maneuvering behind the scenes, the ugly sides of politics, endless negotiations and compromises and defeats. But the conviction or hope is that, despite these obstacles, government can transform the whole of American society in positive ways. The lives of millions of people can be improved!

In the conclusion of *Apocalyptic Imagination*, John J. Collins's book on the characteristics of apocalyptic writings, he states:

The apocalyptic revolution is a revolution of the imagination. It entails a challenge to view the world in a way that is radically different from the common perception. The revolutionary potential of such imagination should not be underestimated, as it can foster dissatisfaction with the present and generate visions of what might be. (283)

The symbolic language of the book of Revelation creates just such a revolution in the imaginations of its readers. Its many worship scenes draw contemporary readers into the narrative. In *A Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Richard Bauckham observes that the images of Revelation “create a symbolic world which readers can enter so fully that it affects them and changes their perception of the world” (10).

As readers, we join our voices to the songs of celebration. To enter this narrative is to see with new eyes, to imagine new possibilities. To enter this narrative is to remember the old, old story, and to live it in brand new ways.

Conclusion

In March 2004, CBS News did a piece about three brothers—Sean, Brendan, and Devin Touhy—who wondered how their love of basketball might make a difference in the world. They combined their vision for world peace with their skills and resources to create an organization they call Playing for Peace.

They go into towns in Northern Ireland and in South Africa, where children who have never played together learn the skills of basketball while getting to know each other. In the last few years, seventy-five hundred Northern Irish children—Catholic and Protestant—have participated, and more than one hundred thousand children in South Africa.

Two months before the story aired on CBS, Sean Touhy and his team of volunteers were in South Africa. States Touhy:

we brought a black school, a white school, an Indian school and a colored school out to a township school for a match. All the buses pulled up to the township school. The kids got off. And you could hear a pin drop. I mean everyone was nervous. And [then] these little kids started singing this song. Three young girls in the township school started singing...and the heavens opened up that day. And

one of the township coaches who works for us was surprised they were singing that song.

And I asked, “Well, what [are] they singing?”

He [responded]...“This is the most like [a] ritualized apartheid song.” [He continued...they are singing:] ‘We’re surrounded in darkness. Everywhere is darkness. But now I see a light.’”

The scenes of singing in the book of Revelation stir our hopeful imaginations. As readers/hearers we enter into the scenes, into the holy space. We join the cosmic choirs. We experience the presence of God. We have apocalyptic hope: a hope that imagines newness; a hope that remembers; a hope that moves us to transform the world!

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!

Amen.

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