
Now: The Post-Apocalyptic Reality

A sermon by Abigail Van Horn

Good morning, and welcome to youth Sunday! This is the one service a year that is live tweeted, #God, and Happy Sixth Sunday of Easter! Yes, Easter is still going on, which is absolutely brilliant in my opinion. If you are anything like me you love milking holidays for all they're worth. For example, when I was growing up, I insisted on celebrating not a birthday, or a birth week, but a birth month. And so, what this meant was that for the entire month of August, I had control over the TV remote. If you grew up in a house with older brothers you know how rarely that ever happened. Naturally, when one of my brothers' birthdays rolled around, and they too requested a birthday month, I took the logical position that celebrating a birthday month is absurd, unless the month is August.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Abigail Van Horn, and I am finishing up my senior year at the Lovett School and will be attending Pepperdine University in California next year. I am currently relaxed and enjoying my last few moments as a 12th grader, anxiously waiting to see what college has in store for me, but it was an uphill struggle to get to this point. I don't know how many of you have been around a high school senior amidst the frenzy of the college process, but for those of you who have, you know that for about nine months, their lives are turned into a three-ring circus centered on the common application. They take and retake standardized tests, amp up their class schedule, and seemingly overnight become heavily involved in every school club, sports team, charity, and fine arts production available. Somewhere in there, scheduling social events is a necessary aspect to the maintenance of sanity. To top it all off, they are all filling out application after application with the sincere hope that their writing style will sound both quirky enough so that they will be unforgettable, yet wholesome enough to make them a strong candidate. The use of big words is highly recommended.

This swirling chaos of stress weighs on your person like swelling cinder blocks. The alarming ambiguity of "where will I be living for the next four years of my life" only relents when all of the bets are made, the decisions in, the cards on the table, and you have made a final verdict. But this relief from an ultimate product only comes after months and months of feeling like you were sprinting uphill on a never ending sand dune: every leap of progress forward is pulled back down with sliding powder.

In short, this marathon can really wear you thin until you feel like an amateur swimmer whose entire efforts are targeted at staying afloat. Unfortunately, I don't think that this feeling is unique to those of us who are battling through the American education system. This feeling of constant resistant motion has become a keystone characteristic of our society. We are defined by how steep a mountain we decide to climb and by how long we can endure running - our heads are down, our water bottles are almost empty, and our constant fear is whether or not we will make it to the peak.

When one first reads today's scripture from Revelation, "Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads," it can almost be dismissed as a description of a post-apocalyptic world. In this world, heaven, and peace, and intra-national harmony would come down as if by magic after a long and raging war with the beast and the lamb and a plot that, if you have read the contents of Revelation, you know seems like the post-modern interpretation of a sci-fi movie. It is post-modern because absolute truth is subject, everything is made up, and the points don't really matter. And so for some elusive reason, I was having a difficult time relating to this.

But after some careful and tedious reexamining of the passage (using the scientific method, of course), I came to the conclusion that these verses aren't describing some far off utopia that might not be seen in our lifetime. Instead, this is a

very real and terrestrial place that we can access whenever we want through our relationship with God. It is a place where we can find peace amidst the up-hill sprints in our days.

A very wise mentor and friend from this community by the name of Brandon Peete had a phrase that he would repeat over and over as advice for when life was getting a little hectic. Brandon was the youth minister here and was a very influential presence in the shaping of who I am today as a person. He is the one who really got me involved in this community, and in the youth Bible study in particular, through some very shameless tactics. He would always call me out if I missed an event, and on multiple occasions actually phoned me to ask where I was.

Becoming involved in that Bible study is the best thing that ever happened to me. When I look in the congregation and see faces like Annie, Camilla, and Blake, three girls who have gotten to know everything about me through the years right down to the quirky details, I know how blessed I am to have had this Bible study in my life. At these Bible studies we all giggled about boys and upcoming dances together, ate embarrassingly large portions of food together, and cried over our losses together, and Brandon was there to help us through it all.

Anyway, his one piece of advice that he used to tell me whenever things in my life were getting a little hectic was that I needed to "go to the wilderness." Although I'm sure he would have loved to see me trying to hike into the wilderness in my four-inch wedges, I believe he had more of a metaphysical idea in mind. He wanted me to take a few moments to retreat inward so that I could have a time of clarity to think through the clouds of commotion, allow the dust to settle, and really get to know myself as a person and a believer in God. In moments like these when I authorized myself to do this, I found an inner sanctuary and made my peace with the surrounding turmoil. Yes, I always had to come out of the wilderness, but I always came out with a steady foundation and knowledge of the path back to the forest should I need it.

No offense to Brandon, but I, being a city girl, came up with my own "wilderness" analogy. It's almost like God is providing a metaphorical coffee shop for us- a place where we can regroup and recharge our batteries with spiritual caffeine in a safe environment that we can enter and then return to the "real world" when we are ready. And also, like your neighborhood Starbucks, God is literally everywhere. Revelation tells us, "There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." This passage is a picture of the fulfillment of Jesus' gospel promise, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." It is because of this that we know that God is always there, ready to give us a peace that passes understanding. "The doors are always open," John says, "Members of all nations are here worshipping." All we need to do is bask in the comfort and hope that comes from the presence of God. We need not worry because the gates are not going to shut on us. We must simply walk in and let God refill our water bottles (or coffee mugs?) and give us a bit of a rest.

Speaking specifically to all seniors: we are about to enter into the next adventure of our life and step into the unknown. For most of us we have never been without what we are about to leave behind: our families, our friends, our communities, and our homes. We are risking all of this security for the noble pursuit of education and paths less traveled, thank you Robert Frost. Not to neglect responsibility as a youth preacher to throw in at least one cliché, I hope that you do travel down a road less traveled. I hope that we make paths filled with thrills and stories with brilliant theses that impress the most interesting people in the world at dinner parties. I hope we trudge paths so firm and so unique to ourselves that we are all a little affected by them. And I have no idea where our adventures may lead, but I am positive that they will be brutal and epic uphill battles to achieve romantic dreams. In the end, I am sure that we will emerge blistered and bruised with sweat covering our grinning cheeks, cockily demanding a harder challenge. We want to climb endless mountains because we aim our dreams toward infinity and accept nothing less. And we can take peace in the knowledge that God will give us an innumerable amount of coffee shops for wherever and whenever we need a chance to catch our breath along the way. Amen.