Fearing and not fearing

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Working with this week's apocalyptic Gospel text evokes memories of childhood experiences and teachings in a Mennonite congregation with a fundamentalist understanding of Bible and life. Within that setting, however, my family was solidly Anabaptist in outlook and rooted in social justice concerns. My public school was, for a community in the middle of rural Illinois, a virtual hotbed of ecumenicity, with all the major and many of the minor denominations represented. All this made for some interesting tensions, especially in a family with an ethos of discernment rather than rules.

As a young person, I did not always appreciate these tensions--or the lengthy and lively family discussions they sometimes engendered. But my vocation in biblical studies--especially as lived out within a passion for the church--has led me to value tension and paradox more fully.

The apocalyptic and eschatological language of the New Testament appears in lectionaries with some regularity, in Advent but also at other times. As part of the biblical tension and paradox, these texts can serve us well in a number of ways. They are one of the ways that reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience.

I find that engaging these texts requires keeping the following in mind:

- Apocalyptic watchfulness is rooted in a social situation. Often this language and demeanor emerges in groups that are or feel beleaguered. These issues are multifaceted and complex, with respect to both first-century apocalyptic and its 21st-century counterparts, but biblical scholars interested in social world

phenomena have insight worth exploring.

- Both first- and 21st-century apocalyptic groups use language in some specialized ways. Apocalyptic language tends to be colorful, sharply contrastive and often hyperbolic. Furthermore, apocalyptic thinkers and writers do not always maintain clear distinctions between figurative and realistic uses of language. As leaders we are required to tend carefully the possibilities for misunderstanding and the need to translate images and concepts across significantly different views of the world, history and the role of church.

- Most importantly, and true for all Bible readers no matter our mindset or theological commitments, apocalyptic thinking takes place within and under the larger biblical understandings of *fearing* and *not fearing*. We are to fear (or reverence) God and God alone. Paradoxically and iconoclastically, fearing God means we fear nothing and no one else. When God appears to humans in the Bible, proper epiphany etiquette requires the humans to prostrate themselves in reverence. But the next words from the divine manifestation are "have no fear." The apocalyptic language and imagery of the Bible serves this larger sense--not the other way around.