

### “Lovers in a Dangerous Time”<sup>1</sup>

As some of you know I have had a varied work history. Growing up in the 60s and 70s I learned that I should search for work that gave me more than money. Because we spend so much of our time at work we should look for work that gives meaning to our lives.<sup>2</sup> Thus I tried a number of different jobs and work environments as I found my way in the world. One of the stops along the way was guitar making or more properly being a luthier. I first worked in this field as an apprentice in Colonial Williamsburg. My second foray into this field was with PRS Guitars, the maker of high end electric guitars.

During that period, which I call my rock and roll era, my musical horizons expanded. I listened to a lot of alternative music in many genres. This included musicians such as Kate Bush, King Crimson, Suzanne Vega, Gentle Giant, Laurie Anderson, Townes Van Zandt and Jane Siberry among others. One of those singer songwriters was Bruce Cockburn. His songs were insightful, political, edgy, and pop inflected. He had a message and his music, as they used to say on American Bandstand, “had a good beat and was easy to dance to.”

When I was reading today’s selection from the Book of the Revelation to John one of his songs popped into my head. I think it is because this passage of scripture calls us to live in the present trusting in God for the future. It requires us neither to be bereft of hope nor to live solely for the future, as the Cockburn song says it asks us to be “Lovers in a Dangerous Time.”

For those who recall the Cold War years, our current world situation with the threat of expanding war in Europe, the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia, the continuing and exhausting COVID pandemic, and McCarthy-like political atmosphere that pits Americans against Americans seems to be a return to the bad old days of the 1950s-1980s. There is a sense of uncertainty, lack of trust, and fear that runs as an undercurrent through our lives tainting so much of what we cherish. As Cockburn wrote, “One minute you're waiting for the sky to fall / Next you're dazzled by the beauty of it all.” That is how it felt back in the day, and for many that are how it feels right now.

To me what is crucial is not so much how we feel but how we respond. We can respond in despair and hopelessness which can lead to escapism. Escape can take many forms. Some are temporary in the abuse of alcohol, drugs, food, sex, or just hiding away because we are afraid of the world. Another way is to ignore reality and live in a fantasyland where none of what is happening in the world is real, and blithely going through the day ignoring what is uncomfortable or worrisome. It is rather like a child plugging her ears and chanting “la-la” to avoid hearing what a parent is saying.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Cockburn, “Lovers in a Dangerous Time,” from *Stealing Fire* ©1984 True North Records.

<sup>2</sup> Two books that have been pivotal in my search for meaningful work are *The Three Boxes of Life and How to Get Out of Them* by Richard Boles and *Life Work* by Donald Hall.

Yet another way of coping is to focus on an unearthly future. People who live this way plod through life with the hope of heaven where streets are paved in gold and all is perfect and peaceful. This attitude does not deny the hard aspects of the present, but is unable to be dazzled by the beauty of God's creation.

The passage from Revelation does point to a new future but it is not otherworldly. When I read this passage with an open heart I do not focus on the future, but on the present. I feel as Cockburn wrote, "Spirits open to thrust of grace, / Never a breath you can afford to waste." Revelation tells us that we are being given God's grace in the here and now, because "the home of God is among mortals"<sup>3</sup> God is not far away, we are not alone, God is here with us. It is just as our forebears said when they named this church Emmanuel—God with us. We live in a time of first things, things that have been broken since the fall in the Garden of Eden where we humans made a fateful decision. It was a decision to try to be closer to God's godliness, and by doing so we ended up further away. No longer were we able to walk side by side with God in the Garden.

It has meant millennia of searching to find our way back. During this search for home we have put ourselves at the mercy of those who promise godliness for everyone when their real ambition is a god-likeness for themselves. We seem to be vulnerable to making bad choices, because we do not trust that God is truly with us. We look for momentary relief from pain when there is release from all that torments us in God. We wonder how we get ourselves in that situation. That is when we realize that "Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight." That is when the best of us starting kicking "at the darkness till it bleeds daylight."

This cycle is like the people of Israel in the Book of Judges who keep forgetting that they are God's people. It is only when they are subject to misery and oppression that they cry out to God again and they are saved only to repeat the cycle when their memory fails. I do not know why we humans are so subject to amnesia when it comes to God, but we are.

Our present certainly feels like a dangerous time. But it does not mean we should fall back into the ancient human trap of following demagogues, charlatans and sycophants. They are not our hope for the present or the future. Our hope is in Jesus Christ who called us to love one another in good times and dangerous times. At all times we are to love one another and that is how the world will know that we belong to God alone for all times.

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 21:3 NRSV