

Prophets Now

Revelation 8—12

A contemporary pastor,
frustrated over the tedious details
of the parish ministry,
weary and brain-sore in his struggle
over the sermon for Sunday,
propped his feet upon the desk
and conjured up a vision.

He was on the beach of a seashore city.
Out across the waters a huge mushroom-like cloud,
ever enlarging, coiled and boiled ominously over
the ocean.

He was struck dumb with fear and immobilized
with the realization that its death-dealing fumes,
along with the tidal waves caused by this holocaust,
would engulf the whole city behind him
in a matter of a few hours.

When he finally came to himself
he turned desperately to some of the mid-Sunday
bathers and beachcombers and tried to tell them
the meaning of the churning clouds.

He couldn't speak, not even whisper.

Kids digging in the sand,
lovers embracing in the sun,
swimmers romping in the surf,
looked curiously at his arm-waving antics
and wide-open mouth, shook their heads,
and went on with their activities.

Not making any impression upon the beachcrowd,
he raced up into town with the frantic hope
that he might arouse some responsible citizens
to what was about to happen.

He ran in and out of stores
but received only pathetic glances
from busy shoppers collecting their weekly
groceries.

The cop along main street was too busy issuing tickets
for parking violations to pay any attention to him.

In residential areas, lawn mowers,
car washers, and boat painters ignored him.

Bumper-to-bumper traffic honked, hooted,
and hollered and almost ran him down
as he attempted to attract their attention.

He finally ran out of breath
and was about to resign himself
to the agonizing futility of it all
when he passed in front of a church.

The cloud over the ocean had blotted out the sun
by now and the atmosphere was quiet and tense,
like the calm before a storm
or the dead center of a cyclone.

He decided that he could do little more
than prepare his own soul for the inevitable,
and so turned in and slipped into a back pew of
the sanctuary.

An organ was playing.
Men and women in their best clothes
lifted up their voices in a hymn of praise.

The minister began to speak.

The visitor's heart leaped in renewed hope
as the man in the pulpit calmly began

to tell the congregation about the very thing
he had been trying to get across to the people
on the beach and throughout the town.

The preacher intoned in a dead, dull manner
as if he didn't care a fig about what was about
to happen,

but his message, at least, was sincere and truthful.
Now the people would at least know and understand
and do something about this coming catastrophe.
But the people about him,
gazing attentively or nodding drowsily,
seemed hardly affected by the minister's words.

The sermon over, the benediction pronounced,
he sought out the pastor and vigorously pumped his hand
in gratitude, still unable to make any sound
come out of his own mouth.

The minister, obviously pleased that his sermon
had so profoundly impressed this strange visitor
that he couldn't speak a sound,
smiled graciously and sympathetically upon him.

He wandered almost unnoticed
among the departing worshipers, fully expecting
that they would be in a veritable panic,
or at least frantically making plans
to warn others and to evacuate the seashore city.

To his amazement they were all gathered about
in smug little cliques talking about
a million things—

dinner, business, children, relatives, vacations.
A group of men were comparing their golf scores.

A trio of girls were ogling a boy and giggling.

A quartet of women were informing themselves
on the latest developments in an old scandal.

A couple of ladies were making a point

of snubbing a third.

There were a few individuals
who went directly to their cars
and took off without speaking to anyone—
probably because they were mad at somebody
or because of something offensive
in the sermon they had just heard.

By all appearances the minister's somber warnings
about the coming disaster had no effect whatever
upon the worshipers.

It was at this point
that the pastor's feet slipped off the desk,
almost toppling him from his chair.
He awakened and for a moment felt immersed
in the horror of a great darkness,
and like a clap of thunder,
the voice of the Lord through the Old Testament
prophet

fell upon him in clarion and urgent intensity:
"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

There was only a long silence.

There was no Isaiah to respond:

"Here am I, O Lord, send me!"