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Matthew 24:36-44

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalms 122

Romans 13:11-14

December 1, 2019

The First Sunday of Advent

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There is something odd about beginning our Advent season with a text that tells us how it is all going to end. It's kind of like reading the last page of a book before you even begin Chapter 1. It raises a lot of questions for me...why would our lectionary begin our season of anticipation with doom and gloom? Why are we talking about the flood and folks being left behind while others are taken up from the fields? If you ask me, it's downright frightening.

When I was growing up there was a lot of talk about the end of the world. My grandmother, whom I adored as you all know, was a biblical literalist. She knew about the end times. She took the book of Revelation as the actual, detailed roadmap to judgement day. She told me how the end times would be awful for Christians, because we would be persecuted for our faith with evil all around us. She said that Jesus would one day finally come through the clouds, descend down to earth in this miraculous light and rescue us from our misery. She longed for that day.

But, as a little girl...I had a different reaction. I remember sitting outside looking up at the clouds saying, "Not yet, Jesus! Not yet!" I remember crying because I wanted to grow up and have a family and if Jesus came too soon, I wouldn't get to experience any of that. I was certain those kind of life events didn't take place in heaven. So, I wondered...what was so great about this thing Grandma called the rapture if it took away all of the things I wanted to do here on earth? It sounded pretty dreadful to me.

I ended up not being a biblical literalist. For me, stories of the end times (or what we call in theological circles, eschatology) were simply someone's best speculation about what the redemption of this world might look like. It gave a tangible way to comprehend the incomprehensible power of God and how we might understand salvation, not as a concept but as a reality. It's just that this kind of literal reality didn't seem very loving at least to me.

So, then what do we do with these kind of apocalyptic texts especially in light of the Advent season of hope and anticipation?

Let's start with this idea...that our text from Matthew has nothing to do with some final salvation in heaven but it has everything to do with salvation here on earth. The coming of Christ realized in our lives today, not in some future theoretical, debatable event. Instead, it is the teachings of Jesus brought to fruition here on earth through our faithfulness. It is truly God among us.

Let's look a little closer.

The Gospel writer is writing around 80 CE and is trying to bring into focus an expectation of how we are to prepare for Jesus' return. And in 80 CE Jesus' birth has happened. So has his death and resurrection. People have at this point in time been waiting for Jesus to return for almost 50 years. They were expecting deliverance. But the deliverance they had hoped for didn't happen, at least in their timeframe. So Matthew tries to reorient their expectations and encourages them to live in such a way that practices Jesus' hope for the world today. In other words, stop waiting and start doing.

It's the space we are called to live in in the here and now. Waiting shouldn't be done with a complacent heart. It should be done with an expectant heart. An active, engaged heart.

I want you to notice something very important in this reading. What does Matthew compare the second coming of Christ to? He compares it to the flood.

Now...when you think of the idea of people being taken up from their fields and others being left behind...who do you define as each? If I followed my grandmother's eschatology...the good folks, the Christians would be the ones taken up. The undesirables would be left behind.

But, in Matthew's telling and if we use Noah's example from the flood...who was swept away or taken away by the flood? Who was left behind to rebuild?

It was the faithful who were left. Matthew is trying to say that the real purpose, the real lesson of looking at the end as we approach the beginning, is to reevaluate our lives in the present. That means taking the joy of the beginning with the anticipation of the ending and living as Christ taught us to live as we occupy the in between.

And, our in between living calls us to a greater responsibility, a greater purpose, a deeper love for one another. We are here to do God's work now. Not waiting for some final escape but building a more meaningful and compassionate world each and every day we are blessed to be on this earth.

Romans says it so well...we are to awaken to our purpose, to allow Christ to indwell us and move us toward a greater calling as Christians in this world. We put on the armor of light in order to bring that same light to others, to bring hope, to bring joy, to bring salvation when we see brokenness.

If we were able to read a little farther in Matthew, we would find that the very next chapter, chapter 25 explains what living in the here and now is all about. It tells us we are to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned. Folks being left behind is a calling that we are to embrace with gratitude and eagerness because God has put important, critical work in front of us.

And then at the end of chapter 25 Jesus gives that familiar charge..."Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...you also did it to me."

Let us this year not just anticipate the beginning of the story. Let us welcome our ability to do God's work today as we live in between. To create positive change, to show love and to bring joy to the least of these. That is the good news for us as we welcome the Advent season. Thanks be to God. Amen.