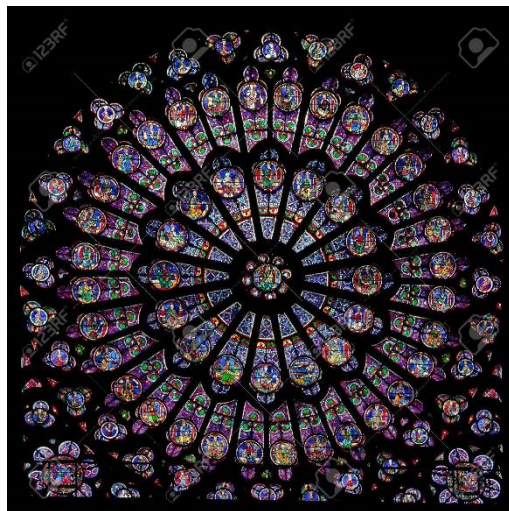




SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 1, 2019
ISAIAH 2:1-5; PSALM 122; ROMANS 13:11-14; MATTHEW 24:36-44

ANTICIPATION



In A.A. Milne's classic *Winnie the Pooh* series, the gentle bear speaks of anticipation without knowing the word exactly. He says the best part of eating a jar of honey is the moment just before the first taste when the thought of the taste is the most exquisite experience in all of life. Anticipation.

More than emotion, anticipation is the merging of imagination, reasonable

expectation, and prior experience that combine to provide a sense of pleasure and purpose. It is the means by which we engage what some have called "radical aliveness," because it is inductive, rather than deductive, a leaning into that which might follow while being fully present, bringing to life the experience in rich ways. Anticipation can

involve good things, like the taste of honey, but also less pleasurable events.

On the darker side, it still serves a purpose. Fred Craddock said anticipation “enables us to ride out the storm, endure pain, stick with distasteful and boring tasks, maintain sanity in chaos, and survive disappointments and delays in pursuit of our goals.”ⁱⁱ

Juxtaposed to that is the notion of foreboding, a consumptive fear that something terrible is going to happen, a premonition demanding all one’s focus and energy on that, at the expense of being present. It may be grounded in reality, or not; but it always impedes the ability to be present in the present, which is the catalyst necessary to experience radical aliveness.

Anticipation can strike the balance between the present moment’s experience and what may follow; foreboding fails in that regard.

So which is it that this passage from Matthew’s gospel presents for our consideration this morning: anticipation or foreboding?

If you have engaged any of the *Left Behind* series of books and films in the last quarter century, you will know that Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins drew heavily on this passage in Matthew as evidence justifying their foreboding admonition for what will happen to those who do not get right with God. You

will be left behind and suffer the trials and tribulation of a world hell-bent on self-destruction.

It is a compelling narrative, even if a gross misread of the scripture.

To be sure, they did not conjure it up on their own. This “rapture theology” was developed in the 1830s by John Nelson Darby, and popularized in the early 20th Century among Pentecostal churches in this country. Which is to say, it is a modern development, an unorthodox divergence, that has found its way into the seams of American culture.

But there is no rapture here in Matthew, or in the Book of Revelation for that matter. The word for “rapture” never exists in either place. There is a brief reference in First Thessalonians chapter four, using the word *harpazo*, which means being caught up in the spirit, afforded a heavenly experience.

So what is Matthew’s instruction to us then?

Well, it may be helpful to situate this passage in context. This is part of the fifth and final discourse Jesus has with his disciples before he is to be arrested and executed. There is a sense of something on the horizon, and his disciples are asking what he thinks is going on. What’s the timeline?

Across chapters 24 and 25, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, he

speaks a good deal about persecutions and suffering, about being prepared, and anticipating the second coming of the Christ. But you will not know when that will happen; only that it will, and you should be ready, lamps trimmed, ready to enter the wedding feast, bringing all your talents, your gifts to bear in the cause of the kingdom. It's all there, and it's worth a collective read.

He doesn't glaze over the hard things: there will be suffering, and there will be joy, and we are invited to anticipate both, to be prepared for both.

This is what the season of Advent is really about—nor a foreboding of any sort, but an anticipation, gestational expectation, with labor pains to come, and joy of new life, too.

The sticking point for some may be the sentence: *Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.* One will be taken and one will be left. Or by extension; one will be raptured, and one left behind, only it doesn't actually say that. There is no rapture here.

Two different verbs are used instead: paralambano and aphiemi. There is no one exact translation for these into English; there are a range of possible translations.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paralambano means to be taken, but within the range of meaning, and drawing on how it is used elsewhere in scripture, it could

actually mean “to be taken prisoner, to be hauled off.”

And aphiemi is “to let go” or “to be left alone” or “put aside” but elsewhere this verb is almost invariably used to speak of “being forgiven.” To have your sin “put aside” or “left alone.”

Read this way, the passage turns on its head, and Jesus might be inviting us to have compassion for those who've been taken, hauled off.

My friends, I do not think for a split second that God created this world for it to be cast aside or to be left alone with its self-destructive inclinations; nor do I think that the “faithful” (however we may define that) are swept away and exempted from responsibility to that world. Why would Jesus devote so much of his life to a vocation of healing care, mutuality, respect, and love, in this world, if we are then told to just forget about it all, and escape?

There is so much to be done, and time is short. There is a sense of something on the horizon; we cannot know the day or the hour.

We can proceed out of foreboding and fear, and angry desperation that will have us taking anything we can get our anxious hands on, and in doing so, experience what it is to be taken prisoner, to be hauled off into the darkness of a small life.

Or we can anticipate the coming of Christ into our lives as a prompt to work for a better world, a more healed world, a world that is radically alive, and we wholly in it. Left behind for a reason.

Perhaps God is gathering the aphiemi, the ones who know the forgiveness of God as a gift offered to all creation. Perhaps God is gathering the aphiemi in this world, in this time, for a purpose, when there is much to be done, and so little time.

Trim your lamps, he exhorts us, prepare to engage that divine purpose of radical aliveness, consider what the world desperately needs from you, and how your deep spiritual hunger might be awakening you to the moment, to be present, and anticipate what it means for Christ to come into your life, and into the world.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Matthew 24: 36-44 [*Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”*]

ⁱ The South Rose Window at Notre Dame in Paris. Rose windows have historically claimed the wholeness of creation, and of God’s design for the whole of it. https://www.123rf.com/photo_28816059_rose-window-of-notre-dame-cathedral-in-paris.html

ⁱⁱ As cited in an article on the use of anticipation in oratory:

https://westsidetoastmasters.com/article_reference/audience_anticipation.html

ⁱⁱⁱ This exegetical thread is drawn from textweek.com, Mark Davis’ blog:

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/11/like-flood-or-thief-or-both.html>