



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, NOVEMBER 27, 2022
ISAIAH 2:1-5; PSALM 122; ROMANS 13:11-14; MATTHEW 24:36-44

PAROUSIA AND A PREGNANT HOPE

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.”*]

Bumper sticker theology is something of a perfected art. There are the feel-good messages like:

Co-exist, where  the letters are formed by symbols of the world's religions.

The Episcopal Church made a splash a few years back with its “God



loves everyone. No exceptions. The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.”

Then there are bumper stickers that sling barbs at the state of our political discourse: “Heaven has a wall and strict immigration policies...Hell has an open border.”

Or, *Keep your theology off my biology.* 

Or the ones using the Christian symbol of an ichthus or fish that grows legs with the tagline “evolution happens,” or “Darwin loves you.”

There are pointed ones and playful ones, like *Don't argue with God, you'll get eaten by a big fish.*

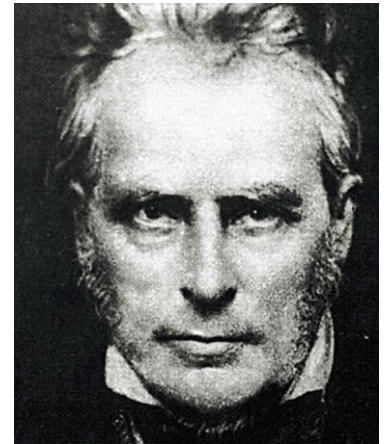
And there are two bumper stickers that relate to the difficult gospel we just heard in which it appears that Jesus is saying some will be raptured, and others will be left behind. It doesn't say that actually, but more on that in a moment. The *Left Behind* series of books and films and video games made immensely popular the notion that you'd better get your life straight, or you won't be raptured out of this dim world, and you will be left to fend for yourself in the tribulation that is coming. The message being that if you're good enough, God will snatch you away without notice, so the bumper sticker that became popular

Warning: In case of rapture, the driver of this car will disappear.

To which the rebuttal bumper sticker soon followed:

When the rapture comes, can I have your car?

Did you know that the word “rapture” never appears in the Bible?¹ It is a figment of imaginative theology developed in the late 19th Century by John Nelson Darby (see photo), an Anglican priest, who extrapolated the apocalyptic book of Revelation and a few



other passages including this one from Matthew's gospel, and built a whole movement around the notion that some will get out of this hellhole of a world while others will suffer terribly because of their unfaithfulness. It had a sweeping impact on the growth of evangelical Christianity in this nation in the decades that followed—fear can be a mighty motivating factor for the human spirit, even if it is theologically moribund.

But what I would suggest to you this morning, as we turn into this season of Advent, this time of preparation, of expectation, is that the core message of Matthew's 24th chapter from which our gospel reading comes, is not a threat but a promise. The girding pronouncement is that Christ will come again. This is the divine promise known in the Parousia, a subversive term that in imperial Rome applied to the emperor passing through town in royal

procession on his way to the next battle, but for those early Christians, the term took on divine and eternal proportions. Parousia is the promise that Christ will come again to usher in God's reign of peace and justice, not the next battle.

It is no secret that I am fascinated by the Greek texts of our scriptures and the layered meaning that can arise from wrestling with the words that were chosen carefully, with intention, and often with wonderfully rich gleanings.

Parousia, for example, does mean the advent, the coming or arrival of the dignitary, but it is not used for one passing through on their way to other avenues of glory. It is used in scripture for the one who comes and stays, who dwells in our midst. It can even be translated "Presence," where the promise of Parousia means the Holy One joins us as the Presence, or to practice presence in our midst, and invites us to do the same.

Which brings me to the two Greek verbs in our passage this morning, where two are in the field, or two are grinding meal, and one will be taken and one will be left. To be taken and to be left. The Greek verbs here are [παραλαμβάνω](#) (paralambano) and [ἀφίημι](#) (aphiemi) The Left Behind camp insists that these are to be translated respectively as

"swept away" and "left behind." But as is often the case with the Greek, there are a range of meanings, and based on how they are used in other parts of the gospel, like the parable of the bridesmaids, it is just as likely that these intended an opposite impact—that the one taken is taken away to prison or lost interest and left, or is lost to the group who remains, and the one taken is the poorer for it. And aphiemi may mean the one who remains, but it is also used to describe the one who is forgiven, who is invited back into the fold.ⁱⁱ

In verse 31, just before this passage, Jesus tells his disciples that when he comes he "will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." He will come here, and be present in our midst, and God's creation will be made new, not left behind.

The question for us is not "when" will this happen; we can never know the hour for certain. An old seminary professor once joked that the second coming of Christ was an idea cooked up by an early church leader who only had two fingers. Christ came once as a baby, and he will come a second time in the end times. That is all.ⁱⁱⁱ

But the truth is Christ comes again and again—is always coming to us here and now—Parousia and Presence are two sides of

the same coin. It is not about knowing “when” that will be, but living as if it is here and now, and was and will be. To notice Christ in our midst. To expect that Christ is always fulfilling his promise to us and to all creation.

Which is why we hear, in this Season of Advent, of Christ’s coming again while expectantly waiting for the birth of the Christ Child. There is a pregnant hope in the practice of presence, of watchfulness; there is

a pregnant hope in the quickening experience of Christ moving in our lives here and now; there is a pregnant hope in noticing the changes in us (in our bodies) that are shaped by the imminent arrival of new birth.

So, come, Lord Jesus, come.

ⁱ The word for “rapture” never exists in either Revelation or Matthew. 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, which does not necessarily portend a bodily snatching away.

ⁱⁱ For more on this, see Mark Davis’ blog <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/11/like-flood-or-thief-or-both.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ This brief story is shared by Barbara Brown Taylor https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-09/dont-say-when?code=l15Rcwwu8sdpkv9c8L1&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=e1519130af-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_SCFree_2022-11-21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-e1519130af-82678819



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL