

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

Sermon 11.27.16

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5  
Matthew 24:36-44

Today, again, we begin the adventure that is the church year. Today is the first Sunday of the new church year, whose first season is Advent. This suggests that this whole thing is to be an adventure. An undertaking important, exciting, dangerous; an arrival important, exciting, dangerous: adventure! And whether it's our arrival to God as Isaiah imagines it (all the nations streaming to God; many peoples coming and saying, "Let us go to the mountain of the Lord..."), or the Lord's coming to us, and arrival among us, as Matthew seems to warn of: either way, strap on your pew-belts, because something is about to happen.

You laugh. You say, "Church, an adventure? I don't think so. Church is about as boring a thing as there is" — which, I have to admit, might be by design.

It's been three weeks now that we've been hearing in church of some mysterious, promised apocalyptic event. The sort of thing that strips away all civilization and civility, the sort of rupture that splits society into fractious conflict unless and until we decide that self-giving is the way, the *only* way forward: it's been three weeks now that this prospect has been prophesied.

And whether it's to come as some final event at the end of all things, or whether it's to come as an historic reality that brings one age to a close and births another age into being, or whether it's an on-going occurrence — a revelation of the truth, this which we might glimpse at any time, that most things pass away and yet that some things endure: we don't know. Whether it's final, whether it's occasional though momentous, or whether it is at any and every given moment, *when* this stripping away, *when* this revealing: it's never made explicitly clear. In fact, the only thing regarding the timing of this that *is* made explicitly clear is that we will never know exactly when it's coming. The only thing we can know with any confidence is that we don't know when it will be — this day of the Lord that will cast in full relief what will pass away and what will endure, what is for now and what is for ever. All that we know of this cataclysmic occurrence is that we will never know in advance when it's to come.

This, also, is by design — for if we *were* to know, we'd take safeguards against it. We'd batten down the hatches and lock up the doors and cross-tape the windows until we were safe inside the world as we've made it and as we manage it. Really, given half the chance, most of

us would make our lives iron-clad in defense against the God whose primary promise to us is that he is good, and whose secondary promises are about his being persistent, faithful, and jealousy ever after us, fast on our heels that we might all live in his good, though disruptive, grace. We'd put on blinders. We'd put on some show we're binge-watching. We'd put in our earbuds and continue on with our day.

In fact, I'd say a lot of us already have. Consumer culture promises fulfillment with the next consumer good we buy, so we shop. Secular culture promises fulfillment if we rise to prominent management within the immanent frame, so we compete for those posts. American culture promises the good life within a private realm that is well defended, so we invest our treasure there. Ironically, though, I think it's church-goers who've particularly excelled at this—at constructing a reality that professes faithfulness yet is largely about control.

On the religious left, we've got the "make do" folks, the functional atheists who, though they profess a belief in God, live as if what good might ever get done is really up to us to do—and I say "we" because I identify these as my people. So...we'll volunteer until our fingers bleed and give until it hurts. We'll write letters to our representatives until we've addressed every social justice issue everywhere. We'll boycott Target and Wal\*Mart and Amazon and Black Friday. We'll recycle. We'll donate clothes from the back of our closets to Good Will, and we'll try very hard to reduce our carbon footprint. And, then, eventually, we'll give up—because our having done all these things won't seem to have made a dent in all the problems that plague us.

On the religious right, we're got the "born again" folks, the ones who insist that, if you just say the magic words, then you'll be guaranteed rescue from this fallen, and increasingly out of control, world. All you have to do is adopt some certain form of faith and interpretation of the Bible and then you can rest assured that you are among the saved. It's all very clear, of course, though one person I was talked with about it had to admit: "The details remain shrouded for me," which struck me as a funny understatement. I searched her for irony, but finding none, I didn't say what I'd have said, "Well, yeah. Those details remain shrouded for everybody"—which is sort of the point.

To dislodge us from our fixity on being in control, to tumble us free-fall into faith where we'll all find that God is more good than anything we might formulate, and that God

endures beneath and beyond what we have cobbled together, and that God will catch us when all our safety-nets break: this is what following Jesus means.

All this religious talk of apocalypse and the end, jumpy as it might makes us each year, falls this year during the same three weeks of the election. It's a coincidence of timing that begs the question, just how momentous an event are we now living through?

This is a live question beyond even people who've spent the last few Sunday mornings in church, I think, because we've simply never before elected the likes of Donald Trump for President—someone who's never held public office and seems in general uninformed and unprepared, someone who has no evident ideological stances or intellectual influences, someone whose self-interest and need for attention and lust for winning are together his lodestar. And from such a person, we simply don't know what to expect.

This has unleashed extreme responses from all sides—anxiety, resentment, calls for reconciliation and coming together, accusations that such calls for reconciliation whitewash the sense of violation stoked by the support he's received from the Alt-Right and the Ku Klux Klan. I know one couple that plans to leave the country, to return to France where one of them had lived as a child. I know of people who skipped Thanksgiving this year because having to sit at table with people whose voting this year felt like a violation would have been too much to bear. A friend woke up yesterday morning to find the tree in her front yard had been strewn with toilet paper, and her first thought was that it was in reaction to her Clinton yard sign and the fact of her “two brown daughters.”

I have no advice about how to navigate all these strong feelings and powerful reactions. I have no words of wisdom about what we should—each and all—do next. What I can say is that this strange story, which Jesus told, is something of a lodestar for me. “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.”

There's little of the context that tells us what he means here. Of that context, I can just tell you that Jesus was in the last week of his life when he's remembered to have said this, that he had spent the day in and around the Temple, that he had recently spoken of the Temple's eventual fall to ruin, and that he'd himself overturned the tables of those selling animals for sacrifice. Clearly, Jesus loved the Temple but deeply objected to many of its uses.

Now he was on the Mount of Olives outside the city gate, and the disciples had come to him privately for instruction around these things. So he went deeper: he spoke of signs of the end of the age, of persecutions that would come, and of a desolating sacrilege that would consume the people, would subsume the nation under the press of the empire. It would be as a flood, a washing over of civilization, a rising up of chaos.

Incidentally, images of water are powerful and persistent in scripture. Water in the Bible signifies chaos, violence, destruction, death. Consider: it was out of the watery chaos that creation came to be—God forming the firmament by separating the waters above from the waters below. Consider also that, during the flood, it's said that water fell from above and arose from below, an undoing of the separation by which life can be life. Consider: it was into the water that Jesus went for baptism, and out of the water that he emerged to begin his ministry as the Christ. Consider also that in baptism it's said we die with Christ that we might rise with him to new life. Consider: Jesus' walking across the rough water of the Sea of Galilee when the disciples, in their small boat, are caught in a storm: the storm doesn't consume him, its violence doesn't subsume him. On the contrary, elsewhere Jesus is remembered to have calmed the sea—a subduing of chaos, a pacifying of rising violence, a putting to rest the sort of unrest that escalates quickly and can overwhelm all reason.

With these understandings as subtext, Jesus then spoke of two working in a field, where one will be taken and the other will be left—“left,” a word that can also be translated as “let go,” “left in peace,” “pardoned,” or “forgiven.” Likewise, two will be grinding meal together, and one will be taken and the other will be left—let go, left in peace, pardoned, forgiven.

It's difficult to know what exactly is the contrast being set up here; it's more difficult to know which, if either, we're to mean to be. Are we to relate to these two in the field, to these two grinding meal? Are we to see ourselves in one, or the other? Are we even to be one of these set in contrast to each other? If so, are to hope to be taken or to be left? Are we to aim to be taken or to be left?

Anyone who's lived through the last fifteen years in which rapture theology hit the big time with the *Left Behind* series might think we're to hope to be “taken up” rather than “left behind.” “Taken up” is thought to be about God “taking us up” to heaven, as with Elijah in the fiery chariot. Escaping the cataclysms of this world and even escaping death: we're to want to

be so “taken up.” Being “left behind,” on the other hand, is thought to be about being abandoned amidst history to suffer its tumult and terrors—and no one in their right mind would want that.

But the story doesn’t bear this meaning out. The story, instead, calls to mind—and now not just implicitly but explicitly—old Noah, that storied man of that storied time, he who worked patiently in preparation for the coming flood, the coming of the Lord’s overwhelming will. Old Noah prepared—though not that he would have control over it all, but that he would endure it all and that by it and by him there would be a new beginning.

In other words, Noah as a role model is one of not being taken up but being left, not being overcome by the flood but being left in peace to endure it. Others around him were perhaps “taken”—swept up and away by the disruption, but first perhaps swept up and away by simple distraction, the doing of daily life within the imminent frame, the doing and doing that distracts you from watching and waiting for the coming of the Lord.

Yes, others were perhaps taken first with the distractions of daily life and then with the sudden coming to an end of all those distractions. Noah, though, with his patience and his faithful preparation for the improbable, the impossible, was left—to survive, to prosper, to usher in a new beginning.

This story is something of a lodestar for me because I have an almost allergic reaction to things that might otherwise “take me up.” I remember as a child meeting a couple at a campground. This was in California, and my family had rented a campervan and was driving north along the western coast. At one campground one night, my sister and I encountered a couple and their dog whose name was Too High. They talked to us for a while, kept us engaged, and eventually pressed into our hands a book that I would bring back to our campsite to show my father. *The Book of Moon*: he rolled his eyes. “They’re Moonies,” he said, of which I knew nothing. “They’re brainwashed,” he explained, of which I also knew nothing, can only say now that the word itself struck me as so creepy. Whether or not it’s true of so-called “Moonies,” the notion that you could be “brain-washed,” that your mind might not your own but has been taken over by someone else: this was so creepy. That you might be captive to some outside way of thinking or be set to someone else’s purpose: yuk.

So, now: to be brainwashed; to be *unable* to think critically and moreover against the grain of givens and assumptions; to be *unable* to trust your own feelings or perhaps even to *feel*

your own feelings; to be unable to engage the world as it is and to come to some sound decision as to how rightly to live; to insist upon some controlled or constructed version of reality, rather than to meet the world as God the transcendent and mysterious and powerful and impossible has made it and is yet making it: all of these resonate in me as having been “taken,” “taken up.”

So does this: to be closed off, closed down, to the possibility that God is doing a new thing.

So does this: to have been “radicalized,” which is really just to have been fixed into some set frame of thinking that forces all facts to fit a predetermined conclusion.

Really, this story of one having been left and another having been taken: this story as a lodestar is one that comes to mind quite a lot as I make my way through any given day, and through this life—that I not be taken up into the fixed ideologies that abound in our day, each promising safety and surety and a bulwark against all doubt; that I not be taken up into the existential panic that seems ever at the gate; that I not be taken up by the provocations that come with cable news and social media and the deluge of the ridiculous, the outrageous, and the mind-boggling; instead that I remain open and awake, that I endure in faith to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

I suggested earlier that it might be by design that the church comes across as boring. And, of course, many iterations of the church are far from boring, are front-loaded with emotion and high drama, the press for personal testimony and the ginned up experience of being “saved.” It’s no coincidence that I don’t participate in a congregation like that, that I don’t lead worship like that—because the fact is I don’t trust such ginned up emotion. No, the fact is I think human beings need time for stillness, need time for meditation, need time for coming to know our own minds and to recognize in each of our hearts the gentle stirring of the Holy Spirit. I think humans—soft and warm and vulnerable as we are—need quiet to prepare and to endure.

This adventure, then, is only as thrilling as it is also quieting, is only quickening as it is also quelling. This adventure wakens us as if from sleep, but for the task of attentive focus as to what’s going on within us and among us and around us. Where life might have us react, faithful living would have us respond—deeply felt, carefully thought, hopefully meant response.

The vigilance that this world requires met with the hopefulness that God's acting in the world inspires: Happy New Year, everyone.

Thanks be to God.