

2nd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 2.25.18
Scripture: Mark 8:32-9:9

I'm going to talk about sex. But I'm going to do that a little later so you can relax for now. Meanwhile, I'll tell you about a funny moment from my ski vacation.

I'm just back from our annual trip to visit my sister and her family, who live in Denver and who ski every free moment they get in the wintertime. In fact, Jon, my brother-in-law, is such a committed skier he likes to tell a story about when he first met my sister. His roommate at the time asked him, "Can she turn?" See, he had to take her skiing before he could really decide whether this relationship would work. He had to see whether she could turn.

"I can relate," I claimed, this time hearing the story. "My abiding question in embarking on a relationship was always, 'Is his eschatology realized?'" No one knew what I was talking about, of course, and I was making it up anyway. I'd never been concerned with anyone's eschatology, be it realized or consistent or inaugurated—never until lately. Lately, though, I'm all about realized eschatology.

Eschatology is talk of the end of history, "–ology" being the action of putting something into words for study, as in biology or theology or ecology, and "escha-" being the end of time. Eschatology, then, is the formulation of what comes after history, when time has come to an end and God's eternity is what's left.

What will that be, and what does it matter?

For what it's worth, Christian eschatology is sometimes understood as an answer to mere apocalypse. Apocalypse, a Greek word is often translated into English as "revelation." And it's a formal term, naming a literary form that imagines what's left as revealed once all human constructions have fallen away—all government, all learning, all civilization. It comes to us from times that are indeed felt as apocalyptic, as a rupture in civilization, as an end of the world as we know it—the fall of Babylon in the 6th century before Christ, or the Roman war on the Jewish world in the first century of our common era, or, apparently, now. Apocalyptic strips every form and formality of human being away, leaves behind the raw material of human nature, in all its beauty and horror, and a lawless, brutal world; and it begs the question, how would any one of us behave or even function?

Kill or be killed?

Or how about this: love? And maybe even a building up of some form of a beloved community? The church!

This is where we get to the eschatological. The eschaton is the final end that abides even beyond the apocalyptic. The eschaton is the last and lasting event, the goal and end, a newly created order of self-sustaining life, and self-emptying and self-offering love by some miracle of God's creative grace. As it happens, there are those who claim Jesus, especially according to Mark, is an apocalyptic figure. But one scholar, Ched Myers, argues that he's actually someone who uses the language and imagery and understanding of apocalyptic but then transforms this fearsome revelation into eschatology. Jesus wasn't just to disrupt the imperial world order, but was to usher in the new creation. "Finish, then, thy new creation," goes a hymn we often sing.

Remember Joseph Conrad's Mr. Kurtz in his book *Heart of Darkness*, which Stanley Kubrick adapted for screen in *Apocalypse Now*. He utters with his last breath, "The horror! The horror!" His life as witness to the exploits of Belgian Congo has come to an end and he sees everything in a full light: "The horror! The horror!" Jesus sees that too, but also beyond that, to something more beautiful, something more abiding and true.

When human striving has fallen away, when all our creating and exploiting have come to an end, there will be beauty and there will be horror but beyond everything there will be glory—because God, and because Jesus, and because the cross of self-giving love, and because the work of God's grace that persists amidst history and humanity but also outruns history and humanity to a final end that is the eschaton, that is God's creation now completed and perfected and made whole, wherein life sustains life, wherein that storied burning bush (burning though never consumed) makes sense and is real, *realized*.

There are those whose eschatology is wholly about the future. There will come a time when history will halt and God's reign will begin. This is to be marked primarily by judgment and the sorting of the saved from the lost. Common imagination pictures this as happening when each of us dies and then is sent either to heaven or hell, but more fiery imagination pictures this as happening with Jesus returning to the world as a warrior ready to set fire to this whole thing in order to purge what's evil. This is sometimes called consistent eschatology, consistent in that one momentous instant when everything will change.

Then there's me and people like me, which might include you, whose eschatology imagines God's eternity as, yes, abiding beyond time, but also as breaking into time. Realized eschatology is

less about one cataclysmic moment of end-time and more about a paradoxical phenomenon regarding God's reign, that it is "already" and "not yet."

Already God's victory is won, as we sing on Easter ("The strife is o'er, the battle done; the victory of life is won..."); and not yet is God's kingdom come. Already the resurrection to eternal life for all creation is enacted; and not yet is it ours fully to live out and to live amidst. Already Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, the work of this prince of peace now complete, the labor of this creator Christ now finished ("It is finished," we're to remember he said from the cross); and not yet is the peaceable kingdom fully manifest. Realized eschatology would have it that we're playing a game already won. The salvation, which comes through self-giving love, is already secured. It will come absolutely once time and matter have come to an end, and it breaks into time and history and our life together whenever we act or are acted upon in self-giving love, the cause of life put ahead of any one of ours survival. Already and not yet.

This is the connective truth that ties together the events we heard this morning—Jesus teaching what great suffering the Son of Man must undergo, Jesus speaking to the crowd of how life is to be found most truly in letting go the urge toward personal safety and security all in the name of survival, and then Jesus revealed as the one who would be glorified and therefore the one to whom Peter especially should listen.

It's not mere coincidence that this happens over the course of seven days—the true ministry of the cross beginning in the beginning of the week, reaching out the crowds with the saving message of self-offering, and then, on the seventh day, Jesus glorified on the mountain with the law and the prophets who've given shape to life in the world since the beginning. It's not for nothing this journey from cross to glory happens over seven days. God is still amidst the seven days of the creation, which is already complete and not yet complete. Something still is being worked out, yet pulled toward a final end as much as spurred forth from an original beginning. Quantum creation, as it were.

So let's take the journey.

Peter: he had just recently singled himself out as the one who recognized who Jesus really was. Some were saying he was one of the prophets, or even Elijah. Some supposed he was John the baptizer, now come back from the dead. But Peter knew, confessed, "You are the Messiah," the anointed one of God. He'd just said it, in the story just previous to this one. He didn't seem to understand, though, what that might mean—suffering, rejection, crucifixion. But why should he? Because, really, this is so counter to what was expected. Suffering? Being *killed*?! No, the Messiah

had long been promised as one who would come in might, to set all things to right, to drive out the occupying forces, be they Assyria or Babylon or Rome. There was always someone, some oppressive force. The Messiah, then, would bring God's justice to the land, would break the rod of the oppressor and the yoke of the slaver. The anointed one would be unmistakably righteous and powerful. Unmistakably!

But no, Jesus now seemed to be saying. The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, must be *killed*—and by these means would rise to new life, and not just for his own sake, his own glory, but for all.

But, no, Peter had his own “no” to speak. “No,” he rebuked Jesus. “No, this must never happen to you,” a benevolent echo of that original temptation by which Jesus began his ministry. I'm sure he didn't mean it, but Peter did sound an awful lot like how the devil's temptations are remembered to have played out. Satan, that adversarial spirit, the one who had better ideas with what Jesus should do with the fact that he was the Christ, *if* indeed was the Christ. Don't suffer: fight back. Don't tolerate rejection: turn the tables on them. Don't submit to being killed: remember, Peter, that sword. Yes, Jesus was quick to recognize the similarity. “Get behind me, Satan,” and set your mind not on survival at any cost but on self-giving that the world might rise in peace.

This teaching would have to reach not only the disciples, then, but also the crowd that had come to follow Jesus, for it's a teaching that will best work the more people there are who sign on to its truth. “...those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

People persuaded by consistent eschatology will hear this to mean that “losing their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel” is behavior for which they will be rewarded at the time of judgment with the prize of heaven.

But people like me persuaded by realized eschatology will hear this to mean that the glorious end that is God's reign is one in which all that have being will submit their being to larger being, a self-emptying that amounts to magnanimous life. Heaven, then, is not a reward for righteous behavior but is the realm in which righteous behavior is the greatest service and the greatest joy, and moreover it's a realm that, since realized, is one we might enter and abide amidst at any given moment.

All we have to do is, with our freedom, choose the good.

All we have to do is choose love.

This is a choice made all the easier when others are similarly making that choice, and so we spread the word that great and growing joy isn't to be found in survival at all costs, which but devolves into the regressive war of all against all, but is to be found in loving community presupposing forgiveness for the sake of peace.

We don't have to wait for this, in other words, but might take it as realized already, might open ourselves up to it as a reign in which we might spend much of our time as rehearsal for spending eternity, insofar as eternity can be spent.

This is why it's said we "practice" our faith. We're practicing something here that we might be prepared for its permanence. We practice it here that the sloughing off of egoism might be felt as freeing rather than punishing. We practice it here that the shedding of individualism and aggression and transactionalism might be felt as blessing rather than humiliation.

It should be said, too though, that we practice this because it is a discipline. The way of the cross, the setting aside one's own survival instinct, not to mention the more conventional urges of pride and vanity, of respectability and even glory: this all takes discipline and practice. It's very hard to walk away from someone challenging you to a fight. It's very hard to let go an affront to my self-image and desire for power and refusal to accept any interiority because it's just too lonely and threatening. So we practice that we might be perfected.

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "What does this have to do sex?"

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "Enough with this weird theological foreplay. Didn't you say you were going to talk about sex?"

Okay, already.

This moment of reckoning we seem to be engaged in as a whole culture regarding sex and sexual practice, abuse, and intimidation coincides with more conscious talk about sex and sexuality in our household. The boys, now eleven and thirteen years old, are both taking "sex ed" at school and are both actively wondering how this whole thing is supposed to go. How do you manage intimacy of the sort that comes with maturation? How do you know when the time is right, when you're ready and when your sweetie is ready? How do you proceed with this thing that you want but that's totally new and that you embark on in partnership but not in apprenticeship? You wouldn't want your "sex ed" teacher with you on a date. You wouldn't want your parents offering advice and providing notes while you're at the movies with your sweetie.

Meanwhile, there's a presumption that sex is part of a normal date no matter how close the two people are, no matter how long they've known each other or even how much they each desire

one another—and the age at which this assumption kicks in is young. TV dramas about kids in high school feature actors who are clearly not in their teens playing characters who approach sex with a confidence and ease that I can only guess is rare in actual fact.

The New Yorker in December featured a short story, “Cat Person,” by Kirsten Roupenian, which lit up the Internet. Concerning a date the protagonist, a college student, went on with a man who was later told to be thirty-four years old, the story had people across social media platforms arguing what it was about. Beginning at the movies and ending in bed, this storied date between two would-be lovers turned disappointed and disaffected strangers confounded readers. Was this story about a rape, or was it about a weasel-y woman who didn’t know her own mind? Was it a matter of fat-shaming (of him) or stalking (of her)?

To me, it was about what happens when sex is “supposed to” happen, even when the two people who’d be involved barely know each other and only hardly desire each other—not yet, anyway. But no one whose comments I listened to or read seemed to wonder whether this presumption of sex was perhaps problematic, which shocked me. So signed on are we as a whole culture that dating and sex are synonymous and from the word go that we couldn’t even imagine that this might be rather a recipe for disappointment.

Sex between two practical strangers is probably not going to be awesome, might even be pretty grim.

Not that I was about to make that argument. I don’t need to be consigned to the bin of virginal religious kooks. Not again anyway. I had enough of that when I was young and trying to figure out how to proceed into this possibly sweet, but possibly disappointing or exploitative or harsh, new realm.

One commentator, thank God, did that job for me. Speaking of another incident of a couple’s rushing to sexual engagement, and regrettably so, she spoke of the “pornification” of human intimacy. The giving over of our cultural assumptions regarding sex that fast is fine, especially when no one really wants it all that much in the first place, or at least not yet: pornification of what could otherwise be sweet and slow, each step a pleasure, even a thrill. I really appreciated her use of that term.

So what I tell my boys is that you get a narrow window of time in life when the world of intimacy is sweet, full of anticipation and wonder and yearning and possible fulfillment. Allow it, then, to be sweet. Let the date you’re on end while your desire is still unfulfilled. Enjoy the yearning that comes with early love, because once that’s gone in life, it’s gone.

I mean, I never wake in the morning and wonder will I see Jesse today? I never imagine what he might be wearing when I bump into him (should I bump into him) and what I should wear just in case I do. 'Cause if I wear my favorite outfit today but don't see him, then I'd have to wear it again tomorrow, and that would be weird. I never get the sweet thrill of glimpsing him across the cafeteria or bio class or (as was really the case) on the fourth floor, west wing of the Cambridge Hospital. There's really not much anticipation in the relationship anymore. Happy as I am with things, it's pretty much a done deal. And that's great, forsaking all others, etc. etc. But why rush to that?

Why rush to consummation, especially when you're simply not ready, and the relationship simply isn't ready, and there can be so much pleasure and improvement in the slow walk to completion?

You know, it's not for nothing that "consummation" is both a sexual term and a theological one. Consummation in theological thinking is the coming to completion of all creation. It is the eschatological moment or process by which God and God's creation are one, drawn as we are to the final time when, as we sing in the old hymn, "the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea." It shall be a time when the teaching of God and the practice of faith will no longer be necessary because all will know and all will be perfected—God having consumed the world, and the world having drunk deep of God, a union now consummated as so much of scripture imagines it in terms of wedding.

Meanwhile, though, *meanwhile*: the courtship continues.

I think another term that would serve well in both realms, theology and sexuality, is pornification. A lot of the theology thrown around these days, especially as regards God's intended aim and end of the creation, sounds pornographic to me, that is in its emphasizing the sensational aspects of life in the spirit in order to stimulate in the audience a compulsive interest and an erotic, rather than aesthetic or emotional, attraction. That's the definition of pornography, as it happens—a presentation that stimulates and attracts in a compulsive way rather than an aesthetic or emotional way. And something that's compulsive doesn't allow for your freedom to say "yes" to it, or to decide, "No," or perhaps "No, not yet."

The fact that we are abiding in the "already" and the "not yet" can perhaps feel to us like, on any given day, we might bump into the one who is our hearts' delight. And I suppose there's some worry to be found in the truth I sign on with, that God has already completed the new creation, that the victory of life is something Christ has already done. I suppose there's some worry to be felt in the assertion that was indeed Christ's assertion, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom

of God has come near.” This might lead, after all, to a certain apathy, a “whatever” conclusion that it doesn’t much matter what we do for, God has already done what needs to be done. But that’s not how this assurance that time is fulfilled and God’s purpose is realized lands to my hearing. The “already-ness” of God’s victory of justice and righteousness doesn’t have me confessing that “anything goes.” Instead it harks me back to the time before I settled and settled down, before I decided and was decided on, back when I was *open* and hopeful that I’ll encounter my love, and maybe today. I might even have the chance to interact with love, to play toward its perfection and work toward its manifestation.

There is, after all, much in the world where love could usefully be built up. There are many places where love could blessedly touch down and reach out. Why not be a vessel for that? Why not a vector? Why not make “meanwhile” slightly less mean, instead abounding in hope and restoration and grace?

Thanks be to God.