

Hope & Peace Amidst Uncertainty
Matthew 24:36-43
December 8, 2019

On this first Sunday of Advent we are asked to focus, not on the coming of baby Jesus, but on the return of Christ the King. He is going to return. Now I know there has been lots of alarmist rhetoric spoken on Television, radio and in movies about the rapture when Jesus comes with his angels to bring everything to a close. There are dozens of frightening images used by preachers of this view. You have nice looking people like us going about our business and poof-in a flash several of them disappear into the blue. So, there is chaos! This, they say, is what happens when Jesus returns to sweep away the believers into heaven. It's not a pretty picture.

Matthew, as all the New Testament affirms, teaches us that Jesus is returning. What's crucial is to be ready. Don't be like the folks in Noah's world who lived as if Noah's warning was just the product of a religious crazy. They weren't bad people; they simply rejected Noah's warning of coming judgement.

In the coming weeks Western society will be preparing for Christmas by shopping and visiting family and friends. Hope, and perhaps even peace, for many will be squeezed out of them by the time we reach the 25th. Most will have little thought for Christ's return because they haven't paid much attention to what this season is really about. But there is a warning in our reading! Jesus is returning to transform life as we have known it. There is a day coming when something cataclysmic will happen. Are we ready for this?

Since we all share in the image of God at our birth, it acts like a honing devise that keeps us connected to the divine, no matter how much we may ignore it. We may refuse its signals, but we cannot ignore the uncomfortable itch within that reminds us of the God who made us. Nor can we ignore the sense of disquiet that is within us, even within our busy and sometimes burdened lives. Peace is not for sale in our Malls.

Some of you may recognize this hymn: *When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.*

It was written by Horatio Spafford, a wealthy businessman in 19th century Chicago. In 1871 the great fire almost wiped out Spafford's assets in downtown Chicago. Two years later he sent his family to England on a holiday promising to join them once his business was finished. The ship never made it as it collided with another ship and sank, drowning four of his daughters. Only his wife survived. Months later as he passed over the area of the Atlantic where the tragedy happened Spafford wrote these lyrics.

As Christians we are reminded that our Lord sees the world differently from the culture we swim in each day. The fact is that for Christians Jesus' birth ushered in a new calendar. Our new year started today! There is a certain peace that guards our lives when living within this new calendar story, beginning here in Advent and moving us toward Easter. Remember the words of Paul to the Philippian Christians:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6,7)

Rapture theology is relatively new. It has gained popularity in the last century in certain quarters of the church, but not all. Let's think about what Jesus says here. Who was taken away in the Noah story? It wasn't the folk who got in the boat. It was those who lived as if God didn't exist. Similarly, in the following chapter in Matthew's story of the bridesmaids, it is the ones unprepared for the bridegroom's return that missed out. The bridesmaids who stayed put were there to greet the bridegroom with lamps burning brightly. So, the trend in these stories and metaphors is that it is the expectant and prepared folks who stay; the unprepared are the ones taken and who miss out.

But more importantly, the message of the New Testament is clear: God's home is here on earth. Our Lord's Prayer, "your kingdom come" will finally be answered when heaven comes down to meet

earth, as depicted in Revelation. This last book of the bible teaches us that God's home is on this renewed earth.

So, the question we need to ask those excited by rapture theology, is why on earth would I want to leave the place God has claimed for the future. It is where Jesus is coming to renew so why would I want to be taken away. And where would I be taken anyway? Jesus is coming here to make everything right as was planned before the foundation of the world. This is the vision of Isaiah this morning. He sees a future where God is present on earth and righteousness reigns:

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

The emphasis of Jesus throughout this Matthew rendering of the Parousia is **be ready!** Similarly, Paul in our Romans passage focuses on our need to be vigilant. That day, one spoken about throughout the Old Testament as the Day of God, is nearer than when we first decided to follow Jesus. Love, Paul teaches the Christians in Rome, ought to rule our relationships with others.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, where the children, learning that Aslan is not a man but a lion are not only startled but alarmed. "Is he quite safe?" Susan asks. "I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," replies Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else silly." "Then he isn't safe?" Lucy asks. To which Mr. Beaver responds, "Safe? Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Hope this Advent season lies in God's promise of a new day dawning when this world will be reclaimed and renewed and on which righteousness will dwell. We are asked to be ready, as he will come when we don't expect it. He is the King, not to be feared, but loved.

Amen