

I hope it won't come as too much of a surprise to you that I really enjoy preaching. It's not because I am a particularly big ham, though I suppose I may be. It is because I genuinely enjoy the pairing of academic study and creative writing. I also enjoy the moment when I'm preaching and I can tell that you all get what I'm saying. We Presbyterians make a big claim that the Holy Spirit works between us in the sharing of God's word and I love when I get to see it happen.

I also love the practice of crafting the sermon. I read, I write outlines to see how the sermon might progress, and then usually on Thursdays, I write.

Anna Best told me the other day that every Thursday sometime around 3:30-4, she hears this deep groan/sigh emanate from my office and a few seconds later I appear in the doorway on my way to my auxiliary library in the Session Room with the words, "If I can just find that last illustration..."

I would like to think that you couldn't set your watch by my homiletical struggles, but apparently, I'm told, you can.

So in the same spirit of self-confession, I will share this with you: I don't like this text.

I looked through my file of old sermons this past week trying to prime the pump a bit to get started and I had the most irritating epiphany: I start off almost all of my "judgment day" sermons with a disclaimer much like this!

Writing "judgment day" sermons is like pulling teeth. I'm not going to wax poetical about the act of listening to them, I'll leave that rhapsody to you all. Suffice to ask, "have *you* ever tried to come up with an appropriate second coming illustration?"

Mind you, the opening illustrations are easy. Indeed they can range from the merely absurd to positively comical. There is no shortage of crackpot eschatological theories and predictions. (Remember, *eschatology* is the study of end times.) Here's my favorite from this week's illustration search: apparently for Christians who look forward to the rapture and expect an eminent return of Christ, it is now *de rigueur* to make arrangements for one's pets in the event of the rapture. And yes, I realize that this opens the door to a whole side discussion about pets and the state of their souls and whether they have them. Resist that rabbit trail. We can discuss that another time. But for those who believe that they're going to be literally snatched up out of their present life to a heavenly bliss, it is considered irresponsible not make arrangements for one's pet's care. There is an Australian company that will care for your pets in the event of the rapture starting at \$135 per pet. I'm sure there are different grades of care available. All the employees have signed affidavits that they are sworn atheists and can reasonably be expected to be "left behind."

See? A farcical opening illustration and I had it in about two minutes flat.

And I think that is a part of the problem many Christians have with these texts about the coming of the judgment. These texts about the return of Jesus are a fertile ground for irresponsible theology. And I'm sorry, I know that I should be religiously sensitive and avoid sounding judgmental, but when theology looks like came from a complete wing-nut, it probably did, and there is plenty of wing-nuttery surrounding these apocalyptic texts.

I am fond of reminding people that the word *rapture* doesn't even appear in the New Testament. Indeed much of what is associated with the return of Jesus comes from extra-biblical sources.

That is a useful thing to keep in mind. However vivid the images may be from the Left-Behind series, they are the product of a fertile imagination coupled with irresponsible scholarship.

This is one of those points where it is really useful to make sure that we pay attention to what the Bible *means* and don't get lost in what it *says*. Remember, we need to try to read the Bible the way that the earliest readers would have understood it. That way we can get at the meaning of a text rather than getting hung up on the literal words of it.

Context matters. If I say to you, "duck," what does that mean? A bird that floats or instructions to seek cover? We know the answer to that by context.

The same is true with understanding the Bible. What's helpful to know in this instance is that there is a style of writing known as *apocalyptic* that crops up periodically in the Bible. We see it more in the New Testament, most notably in *Revelation*, but Old Testament writers also used it. It was a style of writing that was mostly used to communicate with oppressed communities. We know that the style of this text is apocalyptic because it is so different from what surrounds it. When the language dramatically shifts all of the sudden, we know something is going on. We sit up and take note. This is a different kind of story, meant to be heard differently.

Apocalyptic is not code language, but it's similar. It is dramatic. It is big. It is meant to make a point.

That point is intended for an oppressed community. For many years, the writing of Mark was dated later in the first century. For some time, the church principally taught that the author Mark took Matthew's account and shortened it. But now we understand that Mark is the source that is used by Matthew and Luke for their more detailed versions of the story. Mark is earlier and that is important.

Around the year 70, the Roman army desecrated and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the culminating event that followed a Jewish uprising against the Roman occupation. Mark's Gospel narrative doesn't indicate that he had any knowledge of this when he wrote it. So we place the authorship of Mark somewhere in the lead-up to this destruction – between say the years 66 and 68.

Why is this important? Because it tells us what the lives of Jesus' followers would have been like in those days.

The followers of Jesus would have been the suspicious adherents to a marginalized religion in an occupied country with a subsistence economy. Christians weren't yet being thrown to the lions so much, but it's not far from what they faced.

And to a dispirited group of rag-tag Jewish peasants, probably living somewhere around Jerusalem, the words of this passage stand as a bracing reminder that what you see isn't all there is.

When all around you what you see is destruction and violence, what you see isn't all there is.

When all around you suffering abounds, what you see isn't all there is.

The most urgent summons of this text on our lives probably falls on rather satisfied, rather timid believers most of the time. I know it does with me.

But the message is one of encouragement and hope. In otherworldly language, the followers of Jesus are reminded that we live with hope.

Those early followers of Jesus certainly would have been tempted to slink away, to be rather shy and retiring about their faith and their new way of life. It would have been awfully easy, awfully *safe* to simply keep your nose to the ground and not make waves.

Have you ever been tempted to do that? I know I have. Indeed, in Mark's Gospel narrative we have no shortage of times that the disciples represented exactly the sort of behavior that Jesus *didn't* want from his followers. There's a tendency in Mark for the disciples to be a foil to the behavior that Jesus wanted to call forth from his disciples.

Three times in Mark, Jesus predicts his passion and death. And on each occasion the disciples balk and seek ways to turn aside. But that isn't the whole story.

Mark is my favorite of the gospel narratives. It is my favorite because of the very immediacy of it – Mark loves that word, *immediately*. There is a dynamism in Mark that is born of the expectation that the hearer is going to *do* something about his or her faith. Without going into much detail, Mark ends his narrative with a cliff-hanger, you see. All throughout the story he has presented rather timid disciples coupled with rather bold outsiders who notable only because the *do* something that Jesus approves of. But then at the end, Mark leaves a cliff-hanger. After the resurrection, we read that the women, the last to fall away from Jesus, leave the tomb and tell no one, "...for they were afraid."

But we *have* heard the story! We *know* the story, so we know that someone finally got up the courage to *say* something, to *do* something. That's the irony that Mark uses to make his point. And it's written all over his narrative. Mark wants the church that is reading his words to live in the present tense – to *do* something!

That brings us to those admonitions to keep awake. We do not know when we will see Jesus again. Indeed, deeply committed Christians disagree about what it will be like when we see Jesus again. Some folks opt for the belief that it will be a literal second coming, clouds and all. Some folks take a more figurative approach. My goal is not to answer that question today. I confess to a certain amount of agnosticism as to what Jesus' return will look like. If we don't know the day or the hour, the form is rather hard to determine as well.

But we know this: while we are called to wait on Jesus, we are called to do so *actively*. You see, that's the one thing that all the different types of Christians running around can agree on about this text. However we think we will see Jesus next, whether it is in a literal day of Judgment or in a figurative right-making of the world through the work of God's redemptive power through God's redeemed people, the one thing we agree on is that what Jesus wants in the mean-time is followers whose way of life is living the gospel.

That is sort of the opposite of keeping your nose to the ground and not making waves. Since I seem to have taken the tack of self-confession at the start of this sermon, I'll continue it now. For me, not as your pastor, but as your fellow Christian, the great challenge that I face is to live in such a way that my faith moves from my head to my heart to my hands. For me, when I see the problems of systemic poverty and violence, I know that my faith calls forth some response from me, but I shy away from what might be perceived as a political response. Perhaps it arises from a desire to avoid conflict, or perhaps more from a conviction that whatever I think about the political morass of dueling ideology and rhetoric we face, I'm pretty sure I'm not seeing much of anything

that Jesus would be proud of and I'm reticent to endorse a way that seems to be so very flawed.

Whatever my reason, it's an excuse.

Passages such as this call us to an active faith. They call us to seek ways to make things better for others risking the possibility that we might indeed even be wrong, but our motives will be right. That is what Luther meant when he admonished his followers to sin boldly. Trust in the grace of God and *do* something.

In Mark's gospel narrative, indeed in all the synoptic Gospels, Jesus had two favorite topics he talked about. Let me tell you what they are. They are *the kingdom of God* and *money*. I'm pretty sure he thought they were related topics.

The kingdom of God has to do with how we treat one another. God's kingdom is based on shalom, on balanced well-being for each person. God wants us to treat people well. And in a subsistence culture, what you did with your money was what you did with your substance. Remember, with subsistence, there's no excess, there's only substance.

So for a church seeking to live in the present tense, a church that wishes to keep awake waiting to see Jesus, to *live* is to seek to make things better using our substance, our whole selves. Jesus' followers are to throw their whole selves into working for the kingdom of God.

Ours is a faith of grace, and I never want us to lose sight of that because if we do, what I've just described sounds like about the hardest thing in the world. I want the easy yoke, the light burden. Well, not really, not completely. I don't mind doing some work and I know first hand most of this congregation doesn't mind doing some work, we do after all want to be engaged in service that is meaningful to us and to others. But when I say I

want the easy burden and the light yoke, it's because I want Jesus to do the hard work. I told you this was self-confession day.

The other thing that gets me about this text is the way this work just goes on and on and on. Sure this is a text to prop up dispirited people and to enervate the timid and shake loose the barnacles from our faith, but the expectations just go on and on. I had a conversation with a friend this last week who lamented to me, “everyone gets concerned about hunger during the holidays, I just wish I could get them to remember it in January.”

The work goes on and on. It just never seems to get done. No matter what we do in December, January is still going to roll around. It could be enough to make one lose hope at the ongoing need for Christians to act like Christians. It reminds me of a story that I read a while back from Billy Shore, who works with Share our Strength, which was founded out of a headline he read about famine in Ethiopia. He writes,

“Just by chance one day I walked into the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, and I thought it was a remarkable building. I started to study cathedrals, and I realized that they took hundreds and hundreds of years to build. One that I went to visit was the cathedral in Milan, which took 513 years to build – tens of thousands of people worked on the cathedral and almost all of them could have known one thing for sure, which is that they would not see their work finished in their lifetime. That did not detract from their commitment to their craftsmanship. It actually enhanced it.”<sup>1</sup>

It would be easy to think of our work as just going on and on and on, wouldn't it? But when we are working for the kingdom, when we are working for Jesus, our work builds upon itself and is strengthened by the showing of Christ to each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Shore, Billy in The Life of Meaning, Bob Abernathy and William Bole, eds. (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007) p413



So I told you that I come out every Thursday and beat my head on the doorjamb until I come up with an illustration. Only it wasn't so hard this week. I sort of knew it early on.

Do you want to know what my illustration is to hammer this point home?

You're the illustration. You're the only Jesus folks are going to see until we see him again.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.