

I may as well come clean and tell you that I don't particularly like this text about keeping awake. It's not really a favorite of mine. I am not an end-times kind of guy. I don't live my life expecting Jesus to show up at any minute. Indeed, when we talked a couple of weeks ago about how some Thessalonian Christians were waiting for Jesus to come back - after lunch, it all put me in mind of a story that my Old Testament professor, Dr. Patrick Miller told me years ago. By the way, he is Mary Miller Brueggeman's brother. We were in class, and he talked about when he was in seminary and a preacher began waxing poetical about that very possibility that Jesus might in fact, return after lunch that day, just as the Thessalonians were expecting. Dr. Miller confessed that as he considered the prospect of Jesus returning after lunch that day, he decided he would really rather if Jesus did not come back after lunch. It was going to involve quite a number of changes in his plans. He said, "I was about to graduate. I was about to get married." All things being equal, it would be perfectly fine with him if Jesus just stayed put after lunch.

Maybe you resonate with that reality or perhaps you fall into another category. Fred Craddock talks about this particular category. Years ago, when he was playing baseball in college, he had a classmate who would rather dreamily at times, talk about the second coming of Jesus, waxing poetical about it. "Wouldn't it be great if Jesus came back?" One day, as they were standing on the baseball field with the bases loaded against them, he once more broke in to his poetic description of the return of Jesus. "Fred, wouldn't be great if Jesus came back right now?" This to which Craddock replied, "I can't think of a better time."

There any number of flip pseudo-sacrilegious things we can say about Jesus coming back, and in the end, I suspect that most of what we have to say is to mask our discomfort with the fact that we really don't understand what were talking about. We don't know what is going to look like. We don't know when it is going to be. The Bible is quite clear about that. We may not even be sure that we want it, but we know that were supposed to say we do, or at least that seems to be the content of some rather pious church-speak. We're supposed to be ready for Jesus to come back anytime, right? No, I'm not overly fond of this text or texts like it. They tend to inspire a certain amount of antipathy in me, mostly because of the rampant misinterpretations spawned from them. Indeed, through the years, prognostications about what that coming would look like, when it would come, have never been in short supply, despite the text's clear indication that we are to avoid them. Not too long ago, I did a search on end-time predictions, the famous ones. I thought that I would find a list including Nostradamus and others like that. What I found instead was a lengthy discourse about the predictions through the history of the eschaton. That's just the fancy word for end-times, by the way. And they ranged from predictions right after the death of Jesus all the way up to our present time. My favorite, I might add, was one from 1996, when the Jehovah's Witnesses took out a full-page ad in USA Today, predicting the end. It obviously did not happen, and so subsequently they ran another full-page ad a week later, declaring that the end had been postponed. Couple the absurdities of history with the very damaging effects of bad theology, and it is almost enough to send

one careening back to the relative safety of the Sermon on the Mount. We want the safety of *Blessed are the confused for they shall not be challenged*. So what are we to make of this text, whether we like it or not. What we do with the admonition to keep awake, because it is a biblical text. It is part of the witness of the gospel to us. What are we then to do with it?

First, it is very important to acknowledge what this text does not say. When we're done with that, we will say a word about what the text does say. And finally, whatever conclusions we draw we must always draw them in the light of the gospel, and the promises that we encounter most closely when we come to this table. First, this text is not about *the rapture* per se. What is the rapture? You may have seen bumper stickers that caused you to have some curiosity. Well, the rapture is, among other things, a theological construct based upon a very literal reading of a specific type of biblical texts called apocalyptic. Interestingly, the term *the rapture* never actually appears in the Bible. The term came about as part of an interpretive methodology from the 19th century called dispensationalism. This is going to get a little bit dense, but I think it's important if we don't believe something to understand what we don't believe. The basic thrust is this: history is divided into various epochs or dispensations (hence the name), which mark the time up until Christ comes and then after. If you want to make a dispensationalist absolutely giddy, ask them to tell you the differences between pre-millennial dispensationalism and post-millennial dispensationalism. You will make their day. Yours will be ruined by the way, but you will make their day. As I said, it appeared as a theory in the mid-19th century, and it's been built on through the generations up until our present time when it seems to be fairly fully developed. If you've ever poked around the dusty recesses of your grandparents' bookshelf or been in a used bookstore and found a Scofield Chain-Reference Bible, that was the main tool used to advance dispensationalism. The idea is you read every single text of the Bible with an eye for the second coming. These are chained together and that gives you the progression of history.

Now the problem with dispensationalism is that as a practice it doesn't take seriously that the Bible has a context other than the end-times – that the Bible has a context that is directed specifically to a concrete historical situation in which it was written, and from that we might glean its meaning for our lives. The specific text that they use, that have a specific historical context, are those that I called apocalyptic. Apocalyptic does not refer to a novel that uses the name as in smoky, smoldering ruins as we see in movies and so forth, but refers specifically to a variety of literature that you will find in the Bible. As simply as I can put it, apocalyptic is theological burlesque. Everything is exaggerated to draw us in, to make a point. The end that apocalyptic is written to achieve is that what you see now is not what will always be. And so for instance, if you are a Christian living under oppression in the Roman Empire in the first century, the message of apocalyptic to you, as you are worshiping in the catacombs and worrying that you might be found out for your faith and thrown to the lions in the Coliseum -- the message to you is -- what you see now is not all there is. These apocalyptic texts that we find throughout the Bible are intended to be a vision of hope of a coming kingdom. The problem with dispensationalism or any other interpretive lens, that sees it as smoldering ruins off on the

horizon, is that it makes the Gospel into something other than good news. When that is the case, those interpretations miss the point.

Listen to what Stanley Hauerwas has to say about apocalyptic. “Some Christians have taken Jesus's apocalyptic language literally in order to try to identify this or that war or rumor of war as the beginnings of the birth pangs of the end. Unfortunately, they sometimes even identify this or that war that Christians must fight in order to bring the age to the end. They fail to see that Jesus uses apocalyptic language, a dramatic language and necessary to understand the radical transformation that the kingdom names, they fail to see that it's used to announce that the kingdom has come and is present. They will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but the kingdom that Jesus has brought means that war has been brought to an end. Jesus's use of apocalyptic language, in particular, that of the prophet Daniel (that we see in the text today) is not an invitation for his followers to try to predict the future, but to help his disciples learn to live in the presence of the one who has come that they might learn to live in peace, in a world of war.”¹

In other words, if we use this text to make predictions, a use it is rather astonishing given the text explicitly says not to, we have missed the point. If our interpretations of this text, turn it into a text of terror, we have missed the point.

That is the heart of my objections to the interpretations of this text that focus on the rather fantastical events that are contained within it. I am aware that the language seems plain enough. Some folks are going to be taken up. There is a entire series of best-selling books based on a literal interpretation of lines like this. The problem with that approach is that if we spin them out to their logical conclusion, the God we worship is not a God of goodness, but rather a diabolical God, who splits families apart, and imposes untold suffering on the disobedient as a punishment for their stiff-neckedness in not accepting Jesus. So let me ask you a question, and let me give you this question to ask of this interpretation of this text that you may ever see. Does that sound like good news to you? Whatever the coming of man means, it does not mean that God has become diabolical, using violence, destruction and death as tools to coerce conversion. That is not what this text says.

So what does the text actually say? This text and others like it represent a calling upon us, upon all Christians to live as though Christ has come and will come again. Hauerwas goes on to remind us that the followers of Jesus will indeed encounter many false Messiahs who will offer impressive signs and omens, signs omens, he adds, that will look very different from the cross of Christ. Our calling is to present the gospel in the light of the cross of Christ, even in Advent, even as we await the coming of the baby, to present the gospel in the light of the cross of Christ and to live his message and teaching in light of the promise of the resurrection. To be sure, the text warns we will encounter forces that suggests that the gospel is something other than good news. Our task is to discern the difference and to live the difference. That requires some critical thinking on our parts.

1 Hauerwas, Stanley. Matthew p204

It is easy to wind up reading this text, and feeling smug and self-satisfied that we haven't fallen into the interpretive traps of seeking to make this text say too much about the end of days, and thereby robbing it of its meaning. It is very easy to stand in a pulpit or to sit in a church and declare there is something wrong in the world and the message of the church of good news has been usurped by commercialism or distorted by politics, or cheapened by false prophets. It's very easy to opine about these things. It may all very well be true, but if you'll permit me a somewhat obvious observation, doing so risks being a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution.

You see, what's really at stake in the coming of the son of man is whether it makes any discernible difference in the life of faith, the life of practice. Christ has come. Christ has come. What difference does that make in your life? Our calling is to be awake to Christ's presence, to seek to discern his will, and once we discern it, to follow it. And when we do that, that it really doesn't matter if Christ comes before or after lunch. It doesn't matter if it doesn't make a difference. Christ has come.

This text is good news for people who are in need of hope. What you see is not all that there is. There is more. The kingdom is here waiting to break in. Keep awake.

Easier said than done. To be sure, there are so many ways to slumber off, to lose focus, to slip out of a kingdom mind. You will surely encounter them this week. You may encounter them today. You may encounter them during this hour. Keep awake.

One of the great debates in the church in the 20th century was whether or not the coming of the son of man means a literal, physical bodily reappearance of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in the history of the church in the 20th century that came to be one of the marks of an evangelical believer to attest to literal, physical return of Christ that marks the end of time. We still haven't seen that obviously, so we're clearly waiting. And I have to confess to a certain amount of agnosticism on my part as to what that is actually going to look like. Even as I confess that agnosticism to you, I confess, as well, that I'm not particularly concerned about my lack of information or my lack of opinion. The reason I'm not concerned is because the message of the gospel is always good news. Whatever it looks like, it must be good news or it's not the gospel. The calling of the Christian is to live oriented to the kingdom, the coming kingdom, the kingdom that is, during this life, right now. The kingdom, says Jesus, is before us, is all around us. And so while I don't know exactly what the coming of the son of man will look like, I am fairly certain that the surest signs of it will be when kindness pushes out apathy, when communion edges out isolation, when individual generosity yields a better, different future for someone than they might otherwise expect. Not in a vague way, not a vague way, but when the actions of Christians are purposeful and deliberate - when that is the way that we operate, when that is the way that we approach the kingdom of God, it will disturb us from the easy consumerism, that is so tempting to decay. It will disturb us by giving us an alternate vision and that vision is God's vision.

What strikes me as I think on these things is how close we are, how close we are to this, so much of the time. How close we live our lives at the edge of where kindness can

knock out apathy. How closely we brush up against that reality were communion pushes out isolation. How ever-present the reality is where generosity can change a life. It's never more than a few steps away from us if we're awake, if we are living with an eye for the coming kingdom, if we're seeking grace, and giving grace.

Centuries ago, John Calvin wrote that this table is nothing more than a foretaste of the divine banquet that waits for us all in the kingdom of God. The liturgy that we recite says that people come from east and west and north and south to sit at table with our risen Lord, who has come, who calls all of us to come to this table and to know him.

The funny thing is, though, if you look closely - you can come up after church and look at the communion table - take a close look; all you will find is some store-bought bread, plain, old grape juice, nothing out of the ordinary. And yet, somehow, through the mystery of God's grace, it is a remembrance of what Christ has done, is a foretaste of all Christ will do. Somehow, Christ is really present with us in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup. It calls us to be genuinely present with each other. Maybe that'll happen today. Maybe it will, or perhaps it won't. Whether it does or not, Christ will be among us. Christ who has come, will be with us. Will we encounter Christ here? I cannot promise it. I cannot promise you will feel it. I can promise that Christ will be here, and you may encounter him. Or you may encounter him later, on the street, or in your school or at work, because the kingdom, Jesus said, is among us. So keep awake. Keep awake. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.