

Sermon: Year A, I Advent

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 24:37-44

I must ask you from the start this morning to bear with me. I am well aware of the desires of the time: 'tis the season and all. But in order to get to that joy, truly, a fair amount of back-pedaling is required first, at least according to the Gospel. So you might want to keep in mind that lights shine best at night.

At the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, there is a painting that depicts the story of Noah and the flood. It's unlike any other. If you observe it from a distance, all that's visible on the vast canvas are great sweeps of thick paint, furious strokes of black and red embroiled together. Nothing else is apparent. It's all turmoil and restlessness, the surging energy of relentless darkness descending. Only if you step close and look intently enough will you see, then, barely emerging from all the chaos of this storm of paint, a small promontory, a last remaining spit of land. The few, small trees standing there have no foliage. The leaves have long since blown away. Their branches are filled now only with naked women and men, tiny figures desperately clinging to this final, temporary refuge, desperately clinging to the last remaining moments of their pitiable lives before they are swept away into the oblivion of the turbulent blackness.

This was the flood.

This is also the part of the story most often avoided, the vision we displace by the pictures we prefer – the thousands of portrayals of animals nicely matched in couples, insects, birds, reptiles, and mammals, docile and compliant, marching into the safety of the ark – all gentleness and order. The larger reality, however, was not that kind. The flood is a story of engulfing terror. It tells of the destruction of the world, an event devoid of cuteness or comfort or warmth. The flood was God's intentional act of anger, the unleashing of a devastating cataclysm, which made the whole creation no more than an expansive terrain of consuming death.

This part of the story must be remembered. It must be remembered however, because it elicits something extraordinary. For only afterward, only in hindsight, when the material devastation of the flood became literally apparent, did God realize what he had done. And, then, faced with the terrible aftermath of his own wrath, God repented. Never again, God declared. Never again. Before the world was eight chapters old in the book of Genesis, it had become horribly clear that wrath and punishment would never succeed in establishing what is right. Wickedness could not be corrected by exacting vengeance, not even by God. No act of genocide, however complete, however excused, could cleanse the world. Redemption could come only by a wholly different means.

When Jesus spoke of the age of Noah, he was not referring to the sunny brightness of rainbows. He meant to draw to mind the flood's dark annihilation. The passage read from Matthew's Gospel is stark; the message is foreboding. Jesus warns of an event of even greater judgment that, in eerily similar fashion, will come unexpectedly, when no

one is wary and no one is prepared. This is the kind of warning in the Bible that is often used to instill fear. “You’d better get your life in order, because God could come anytime, and, when God comes, you’d better not be caught with your hand in the cookie jar.” It’s impressive what people will do when they are afraid. Guilt and fear are supremely effective motivators. It’s even more impressive, and sometimes even dreadful, to see what some will do when they become convinced that the very end of the world could arrive at any moment. It’s a conviction that has a way of focusing one’s attention acutely.

To read Matthew’s text in this way, however, is to misread it. This passage is not about the end of the world or the rapture or the second coming of Jesus or any event in any future time. It’s not about our having to live with the anxiety that God’s judgment could come at any moment. This text tells, rather, of a very different disruption of all things and a very different kind of time and judgment and darkness. God would come, said Jesus, when no one suspected it. God would come when the world was too busy about the business of busyness to notice. God would come in such a manner that no one would realize God’s presence until a completely unexpected kind of divine judgment was already accomplished.

What Jesus was referring to here, was his very own time. He was referring to himself. There he stood and no one recognized him. No one saw him for who he was. No one, seeing him, saw God. And soon enough, he would be the one swept away by the descending darkness, by the crowds who considered him just one more threat and irritation. He would be subjected to their anger, their scoffing, their eager lust for blood. He would be cruelly dispatched, like a common thief, like any one of thousands of persons that the Roman authorities chose to rid themselves of. The historians of the time took no notice of Jesus’ life or his death. It didn’t warrant mention, not even a footnote in the voluminous work of Josephus, the most famous chronicler of that time. Other matters – politics and empires and governors and armies – were far more significant.

The beauty and power of Jesus’ warning, however, is that it’s the perfect opposite of the story of Noah. It’s God’s own response to what failed then. This is the point of keeping the whole story of the flood before us: an even greater judgment, a more severe cataclysm, came when no one was watching. God himself was mocked. God was crucified. God was put to death by us, by God’s own unwitting creatures. And no one even marked the date. Everything else went on as usual. Except this: this death defeated death, and Jesus’ resurrection made all things new. Thus, in him, God announced that the end of the world had come, but this time fittingly and rightly, this time without the backlash of regret or the horror of seeing the ghastly results of un-tethered wrath. This time, no repentance came afterward. Jesus was God’s final judgment of the world, this time in love rather than in anger. And the end that God announced in him was not the end of dark oblivion. It’s the brightness of the world’s end becoming, in a very different sense, its goal, an appointed destination and fulfillment, realized in forgiveness, in peace and in eternal communion.

There is, in Jesus, no longer any end except redemption – the redemption of our lives, the redemption of our world, and the redemption of all disaster and all evil. And

therefore, there is no fear in Christianity either. It has been permanently displaced by hope and grace. The surprise of God does not consist in sudden vengeance, but rather, now, in God's quiet but dramatic overturning of all things for the whole world's good, throughout all ages.

This is the lesson never quite learned, the good news never quite heard. We tend to make the story of Noah a quaint and cozy child's tale, the stuff of stuffed animals, rather than a primal tale of anger's wholesale devastation. And, in similar reduction, we make Jesus a pretty good guy with some pretty admirable ideas – or worse, the God who has saved us but threatens all those who don't share our own beliefs. But both stories are far larger than this. They are both cataclysmic, truly earth-shattering – one directed toward destruction, the other, surpassing the first, directed toward salvation without bounds of time or space or merit.

Paul understood the place of both. That is why, finally, as an end, he could advise the church in Rome that following one rule fulfilled all life. "Owe no one anything," he said, "except to love one another." He set no conditions for this and admitted no exceptions. He drew no boundaries that, if transgressed, demanded, then, another approach. The church was free to live and act radically. Love is all and love is everything, Paul claimed, because the triumph of Christ, more than the flood, has determined the very end of the world. It isn't just the *season* now to be joyful, (here and there, in moments of unusual generosity and casual good will); joy is the *destiny* we share always and under all circumstances – light abounding, dispelling all night.

This is what Christ has done. This is the great and exciting boldness of our Christian faith, made explicit in our very sense of time. As the first word on the first day of the first year of the Christian calendar—we proclaim light with such brightness. All our songs should be of this.

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