

2022 11 27 – Rapture or Renewal?

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5

Matthew 24:36-44 (The Inclusive Bible)

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is one that I have often avoided. In fact, I have preached on this scripture reading only once before and then I just skirted around the edges of its meaning. And I know that I am not alone amongst preachers. This passage is challenging for all of us who profess a more liberal theology. But this year, I decided I would face it head on for the first time.

So what is this scripture passage really about? Several times it refers to the coming of the Promised One:

“The coming of the Promised One will be just like Noah’s time.”

“So it will be at the coming of the Promised One.”

“The Promised One is coming at the time you least expect.”

In other translations we read about “the coming of the Son of Man” and another phrase that's commonly used is “the Second Coming.” This scripture passage is talking about a time when the Christ, the Messiah, the Promised One, will come again.

When this scripture passage was written Jesus had been dead for about 50 years. The followers of Jesus were gathering in communities all around the Mediterranean. There was a great hope that the reign of God, the kingdom of peace and justice that Jesus had talked about would arrive in the near future, that

it would come quickly and with great force. In fact, some theologians were talking about Christ coming with the eclipse of the sun, or with an earthquake, or a great fire or even with the sound of angels blowing their trumpets.

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew put these predictions in the mouth of Jesus and suggested that he announced his own Second Coming. Most current scholars would argue that Jesus never said these words; that he never talked about the second coming of the Promised One. But even if these were not Jesus' own words, it's still important to understand what that First Century writer was saying, and why.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew compared the coming of the Promised One to three separate events. First he wrote:

The coming of the Promised One will be just like Noah's time. In the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, having relationships and getting married, right up to the day Noah entered the ark. They were totally unconcerned until the flood came and destroyed them. So it will be at the coming of the Promised One.

This prophesy or prediction could be interpreted in different ways. Some would suggest that the Second Coming, the coming of the Promised One, is going to lead to mass destruction, like Noah's Flood. In fact, there are some biblical scholars that believe this will be the case. They believe that floods, earthquakes, fires and even war are signs that the Second Coming is near. But I would argue that this author is making a different point. I believe he is focussing on the fact

that the people in Noah's time were oblivious to what was happening around them. They were unaware and unprepared. Some might argue that today's Climate Change deniers are wearing similar blinders.

The author goes on to talk about people being taken, snatched away, kidnapped while going about their daily tasks:

Two people will be out in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.

Two people will be grinding meal; one will be taken and one will be left.

This image of being taken away has evolved into an understanding of the Second Coming called the Rapture. How many of you are familiar with this term? The word Rapture comes from the Latin verb *rapio* which means "to take away." There's actually a recent series of books and films called "Left Behind" in which the author has fictionalized a time before the Second Coming when a small group of people who have been "saved" will be "raptured" or "taken away" so that they can avoid the destructive times that will lead to the Coming of the Promised One.

This idea is fairly recent in Christian understanding and is held by only a small group of conservative Christians. So no, I'm not recommending these books or films. In fact, they are not particularly well done and the Rapture is not something that I believe in. I believe that this illustration is just another warning to be prepared, to be watchful. The author writes, "Therefore be vigilant!" For you don't know the day your Savior is coming."

The third image is that of a thief breaking into your home. And again, the author is not predicting that the Promised One is going to steal your belongings. Instead he is suggesting that like an owner with a “watchful eye” we “must be prepared in the same way.”

So, if the coming of the Promised One is not going to be a flood, or a kidnapping or a break-in what is it that we should be prepared for? What is it that we need to be watching for? We often think of Advent as a time of waiting for Christmas, for the birth of Jesus. But scripture passages like this one, remind us that the season of Advent is not just about the past, it is also about the present and the future.

Like those early followers of Jesus, we are also still waiting and hoping for the coming of the reign of peace and justice, the kingdom of God. This was the Good News that Jesus preached about. Jesus wasn’t the first one to tell of its coming. The prophet Isaiah also spoke of a time when the people of world would, “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” The prophet knew this would only be possible if it was a Spirit of love and justice that was rendering decisions between the nations, in other words if there was peace and prosperity for all people and for all of creation.

This is the Good News, the change, the renewal, that we need to prepare for. This is the world that we need to be watching for. Every day, we are called to look for glimpses of Emmanuel, God with us. We are called to be aware of the presence of the Christ in our neighbours and in all of creation. I believe that the

Second Coming, the Coming of the Promised One is happening right now before our eyes and I believe that it is up to you and me. God's love is already at work in the world and we need to be ready to help with this sacred work of renewal.

Being ready is not about the rapture, floods or thieves. Being ready is not about being as holy or pious as we can be, it isn't about how often we pray or even what we profess to believe. Too often we are focussed on the wrong things and we miss out on what is truly important. I believe that being prepared is about allowing the loving Spirit of Christ into our lives. It is about doing our part to make possible this renewal of the world that was prophesied by Isaiah and preached by Jesus.

I am going to end with a poem by Mary Oliver. It is a poem about being prepared for the Coming of the Promised One. It is called "Making the house ready for the Lord."

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but still nothing is as shining as it should be for you. Under the sink, for example, is an uproar of mice — it is the season of their many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves and through the walls the squirrels have gnawed their ragged entrances — but it is the season when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And the raccoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow; what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox, the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know that really I am speaking to you whenever I say, as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in.