

Keep Awake

Matthew 24:36-44

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, December 1, 2019

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, “Warning: In case if the rapture, the driver of this car will disappear”? Apparently, you can also buy one that says: “When the rapture comes, can I have your car?” Sorry, I could not resist. The word “rapture” does not actually appear in the Bible. It is a complex word. It can have the violent connotation of being seized and abused (as in “rape”). It can also have an ecstatic spiritual sense of being carried away which is implied in the first version of the bumper sticker – though how inclusive and life-affirming this hope is varies greatly. The first bumper sticker expresses the hope of some Christians that they will be among a select few who will be taken up by God into a new life at a cataclysmic moment.

The Judeo-Christian tradition does include a teleological (telos: end point or goal) trajectory, that is, it assumes a historical development originating from God and being guided towards God’s goals and dreams. That is also why the first Sunday of the new church year, the First of Advent, strangely begins with a scripture reading hinting at the end of time. We are reminded that the one whose coming we await at Christmas will also come again. This can engender the hope that all that is will finally be transformed according to God’s will and vision. Depending on the vision and on what is going on in your own life right now, that can be a comforting message. Ask people caught in war zones, ask someone suffering oppression in the many forms suffering can be felt. When you feel overpowered or abused by people or a disease, it is good to know that someone other than your oppressor will be in charge when all is said and done.

The more dramatic all-consuming and often violent apocalyptic (=revelation) versions of God’s expected intervention were especially prevalent around Jesus’ time. It is hard to know what Jesus really thought and taught about this. I find it difficult to reconcile how the one who asks for forgiveness of his enemies even on the cross would come back to slaughter the multitudes and trample on the grapes of wrath. Such is the imagery embraced in the New Testament Book

of Revelation.¹ Such violent visions and certain interpretations of today's text have led to the first version of the bumper sticker awaiting individual rapture beyond this world: "Warning: In case if the rapture, the driver of this car will disappear!" It makes you wonder where the driver gets such confidence and whether their concern extends beyond their own life! In some rapture focused circles this expectation also allows for a blatant disregard for the well-being of our planet. Why care about the environment if the earth is seen as corrupt and awaiting divine destruction?

Where does the text from Matthew fit in? Matthew is writing after the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 72 AD. Rome was ruling in Palestine and cracking down on dissent. Christ's return could be a comforting notion for people living under persecution and occupation back then as well! Matthew is generally more concerned about judgment than some of the other Gospel writers although his vision of grace and love for the world clearly broadens beyond the people of Israel. He may well have assumed that Christ would come again at some point for a great clean up (as John Dominic Crossan likes to say) or transformation of the world.

However, Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that Matthew would have been more likely to put the second version of the bumper sticker on his car if he'd had any:² "When the rapture comes, can I have your car?" What might be meant by this? I can imagine all sorts of intentions from complete cynicism about anything religious to simply wishing to make fewer assumptions and/or keeping the focus on the here and now on this precious earth. I agree with Taylor and other commentators that Matthew seems more intent on keeping his people focused on how they are living in the here and now.³ Matthew was probably dealing with at least two difficult attitudes in his early Christian community. Some might have been wondering: If Jesus still has not come back decades after the ascension, will he ever come back? Are the stories about him

¹ This is also a stark reminder that we should not presume that the Hebrew Scriptures represent a judging and violent God and the Christian Scriptures a loving God.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2004) 110.

³ See also David Bartlett in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.1* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2010) 24.

even true? Does it matter what anybody does? Matthew was probably also dealing with the flipside of this coin. Some people thought they had figured out who was in and out in God's plan of salvation and were resting on their presumed laurels instead of being present in the present moment.

Could it be that Matthew puts his emphasis on lighting a fire under everybody's behind to stay awake and present in the present moment? Notice how Matthew portrays even Jesus as not knowing when or how God would bring about a final transformation. Matthew is reluctant to pin God down! We probably also do well to hear this text together with Matthew's vision of a divine judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. In this text and image, the determining factor in the judgment is whether we are compassionately caring for others in need. Have we given food to the one who is hungry, visited those in jail and those who are sick? Most importantly, Matthews describes Jesus as saying that we meet and serve him as the Christ in the one who is hungry and alone, in jail or in need of clothing. It's all about loving God with all our heart, mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves.

I hear this vision of God's presence and in-breaking as central to the admonition in today's text: "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming!" Christ is coming to us all the time in people who are struggling. The person in need of shelter on a freezing night in December. The friend who is struggling with a debilitating illness and needs a hug and listening ear. The young father needing to get his car fixed so he can keep his job (we sure could use some extra cars as that second bumper sticker suggests!). Christ comes to us in the person struggling mightily to break free from the shackles of addiction. Christ comes to us in the parent who is elderly and afraid of losing their memory, afraid of dying. As my teachers in the Living School (www.cac.org) like to say, the second coming of Christ is not about some rapture of the chosen few. It happens every time the love of God flows through us and suffering is addressed and alleviated. Where suffering happens, the incarnate God is present. Where healing happens, the living Christ has come again in and through us as the *Living Body of Christ* on earth. This is not simply our doing. It happens by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I would like to add one additional way of imagining rapture which also locates us in the here and now. A young man was seeing Jim Finley (*Living School* Core Faculty) for trauma therapy and shared this experience which was part of his own healing. His wife and the infant daughter had only recently come home from the hospital after the birth. While his wife was out to do some shopping, he stayed home with the baby. He laid down on the couch with his infant daughter lying on his chest. She fell asleep with her mouth right up close to his ear. They just lay there and he listened intently to her breathing. Tears started streaming down his face as he was overtaken by the utter beauty and miracle of her being. As each breath came as a complete gift, the life and love of God pouring itself out in that moment in and as his daughter overcame him with a gratitude beyond words. He was carried away, if you will, by the preciousness of life in all its fragility. Call that rapture!

Let us not worry about some individualized and isolated transport into some distant realm. Let us stay present to where and how Christ is manifesting in our midst calling on us to hope, dream and act together by his power. What we experience now is already part of God's timeless eternity. As to what lies ahead, let us keep awake with hope and say, "God, your will be done." Let us even invite God in to come like a thief in the night as today's text also suggests (Matthew 14:43-44). Rather than guarding our inner house, let us rejoice that God may rob us of our fears, judgments, projections, our self-righteousness as much as our self-condemnation. This thief will come disguised as a helpless vulnerable and beautiful child at Christmas, breathing into our ears so that our hearts may break open and our arms extend in their embrace of this fragile and beautiful world.

For Reflection: (/ connotes line changes not included to save space)

When you are really free
You will no longer pine away/ For freedom;
You will be present in
This moment;/ You will be happy to follow
God alone in the light/ That shows us where we are.⁴

⁴ Mark S. Burrows and John M. Sweeney, *Meister Eckhart's Book of Secrets: Meditations on Letting Go and Finding True Freedom* (Hampton Roads: Charlottesville, VA, 2019) 35.