

The Future Isn't What It Used To Be

a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 16, 2022

based on 2 Thess. 3:6-13 and Luke 21:5-11

1

A story. There was a Rabbi in Russia who was a mystic. He had come to believe that not only did God exist. He came to believe that nothing existed BUT God. And he came to believe that everything that happened, happened for some vast purpose. Most of the time he believed this and acted on it.

One day he was lecturing in a certain village saying these things and somebody asked him the following question. Rabbi, believing as you do in fate, would you be willing to go down to the place between the mountains where the train comes through every night at midnight and lay down on the tracks and see if it's God's will to take you home tonight or spare you. The rabbi thought a minute and said "Yes," on one condition. "That if I somehow survive, your rabbi will give me the hand of his 18 year old daughter, Frieda, in marriage afterward." Frieda was quite beautiful.

Well, the rabbi had been looking for a husband for his daughter and agreed. Nearing midnight the whole town went out to the pass between the mountains with torches blazing as the rabbi laid down on the tracks.

They had taken a coffin and also a wedding canopy with them so as to be ready for either eventuality. Right at midnight the train came barreling into the valley. The engineer seeing a great light coming from the pass slowed his train slightly and motored along attentively until he could see a crowd standing on a promontory above the tracks, torches blazing in the night. So he put on the brakes and slowed the train until it stopped just a few feet in front of the rabbi who had made his bed on the tracks.

The rabbi who believed in fate jumped up and the canopy was summoned and right there, on the tracks, they solemnized the marriage of the rabbi and Frieda. The newly married couple went away to another country and no word ever came from them.

Thirty years later the rabbi came back through the town on a speaking junket and someone recognized him. “Rabbi,” the man said, “do you *still* believe in fate?” “Yes, of course I do,” the rabbi said.

“Well then, would you go out tonight to the pass between the mountains and lie down on the tracks and see if tonight God might want to take you from this world?” And the rabbi said, “Yes,” he would still be willing. “But,” he said, “I wouldn’t marry Frieda again.”

Whether you believe in fate or not, let me ask you the rabbi’s question, “If you had your life to live over, what might you do differently? Anything – big or small? Well, hold that thought. I want to plow a little ground before we come back to that question.

In last week’s sermon I spoke of how the Old Testament didn’t fall out of the sky. Like all the best literature, it rose out of the ashes of catastrophe. Much of it was actually written down in response to the torching of King Solomon’s temple in 596 B.C. by the Babylonians.

Hebrew people who couldn’t imagine that God would ever let their country lose a war, let alone allow their sacred temple go up in smoke, found themselves in shock. Many of them were led on foot from Jerusalem to Babylon where they were kept in captivity for a couple of generations. There they came to accept that the heart of their faith was no longer a place -- a temple, but was instead their story. But that took a long time after a lot of wondering about why they’d suffered so much.

Five hundred years later, after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, something very similar happened. Jesus’ disciple Peter, and Jesus’ brother James, were heading up the beginnings of the early church in Jerusalem. Many of Jesus’ original disciples continued to worship in the temple and their eyes were on the past. They kept waiting for what they thought would be the imminent return of Jesus.

They waited and waited and waited, and, you know, he didn’t come.

We are here, worshipping today, NOT because of them. Nope. We are here today because of the apostle Paul who looked scornfully at those Jerusalem based Christians. A text from Paul's second letter to the Christians in Thessalonica may reflect some of that scorn. In it Paul has sharp words for Christians who are lazing around. Perhaps, like Peter, they are waiting only for the end of time.

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every one who is idle and does not live according to the teaching. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

These folks felt that since Jesus was to return any minute, why should they work? As a result they were a burden to the rest of the community.

To these Paul said, "Imagine a world where Christians aren't content to just sit around. Imagine a world where Christians feel called to build a world governed by Jesus' teachings? I have a dream."

And so, the teachings of Jesus about how to live were written down and like the Israelites, Christians became people of a book, too.

But the idea that we may be living in the last days has been hard for Christians to get shut of for 2000 years now. The books in the immensely popular LEFT BEHIND series of books attest to this. Remember those best sellers, on sale by the ton at Costco a few years ago? Terribly written and designed to make their creators ridiculously rich.

They pander to the following idea – *"Wouldn't it be great to be part of a secret society where only a relative small elite know the secret timetable of history?"*

It also panders to an even lower longing – *"Wouldn't it be great to think nearly everyone is going to hell but me and a few others?"*

Well, Jesus offered the world a different way of looking at the future.

His idea was this. We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future, and that alone holds enough hope for anyone to live out of.

In today's text from the gospel of Luke, looking for an image of hope, Jesus, always the iconoclast, chooses an odd picture –

Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

"Teacher," they asked, "when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" He replied: "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them.

Some among his followers couldn't imagine the world without the temple that King Herod built standing erect, white marble gleaming in the sun.

It's hard to have your expectations dashed. It's hard to embrace an entirely new world that is aching to be born. Especially for radical *true believers* longing for the return of some day, far in the past that never really existed.

What do you think motivated Osama Bin Laden?

I think it's pretty simple. He could not bring himself to imagine a world where Arab girls might go to school past sixth grade; a world where they could marry whom they please, wear whatever they want, sit next to their husbands in worship, and have control over their own bodies.

That thought was killing him long before they found him hiding out in the Pakistani suburb. Rather than that, he wished, I'm sure, that the world would just end.

Muhamud Atta, one of the principal 9/11 hijackers, left a will which, in part, said, "Let no woman attend my funeral service. Let no woman ever visit my grave."

Well, I never like to criticize another person's religion. But that is **not** a healthy outlook. And, you know, there are Christian fundamentalists who hold similar views.

Neither Jesus nor Paul imagined a final cataclysmic war that would end history. As Paul said,

We command and exhort you in the Lord Jesus Christ to do your work quietly and to earn your own living. Brothers and sisters do not weary of doing what is right.

In the folk history of St. Francis there's a winsome story of the saint who is hoeing his beans one afternoon when someone asks what he would do if he knew the world would end that very night.

Would he go into town to the main sanctuary and toll the bells and make a great sermon, appealing to the people to renew their faith?

"Oh," the saint is supposed to have said, "I guess I would just stay right here and hoe my beans.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes holds so much wonderful wisdom. It comes at life with a pretty jaundiced eye. "All is vanity," says the preacher of that sermon. But he backs up from that pessimism a little near the end to say,

Go, eat your bread with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart . . . Enjoy life with th partner whom you love, all the days of this . . . life that God has given you under the sun. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. What your hand finds to do, do with all your might, for that is your portion in this life.

Some years ago, 50 people over the age of 95 were asked, "If you had your life to live over what would you do differently?" Remember? That was the question I began with this morning.

The three responses that were repeated over and over were --

- 1) I would reflect more
- 2) I would risk more
- 3) I would do more that would live on after I was dead.

6

1) I WOULD REFLECT MORE --

Reflecting meaningfully is our Sunday morning task. It's what we are here in church to do, partly. To punctuate our week with what we don't often make time for all the rest of the week. Here's that idea put perfectly, I think, by Paul Hindemith, the composer –

"Your task it is, amid confusion rush and noise, is to grasp the lasting, the calm, and the meaningful, and finding it anew, to hold and treasure it."

2) I WOULD RISK MORE --

Life is full of risk, but some people embrace more than others.

Prime minister of Israel, Yitzak Rabin, signed the Oslo accords in 1995, paving the way to a possible peace between Jews and Palestinians. He was assassinated 27 years ago leaving a rally in Tel Aviv where he spoke in favor of those agreements. He was struck down by an orthodox Jew who could not imagine a world in which Jews and Palestinians could live, side by side, in peace.

Rabin's last public words, spoken moments before his murder were these: "I believe there is now a chance for peace, a great chance (RISK) and we must take advantage of it for those standing here, and for those not here - and they are many. (GENERATIONS TO COME). I have always believed that the majority of the people want peace and are ready to risk everything for it."

3) I WOULD DO MORE THAT WILL LIVE ON AFTER I AM GONE --

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, [Jesus] said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

What really lasts? We need to ask that question from time to time.

Some years ago a pastor friend who was serving as an interim pastor of a large church in the Phoenix area called to urge me to submit my resume to the church he was serving. He said, "This church is in a gated community. There's no one here under 55. You will have no Sunday School to manage, no Youth Group to worry about, no night meetings, and they will double what you're making now."

I told him I didn't even have to think about it. I couldn't imagine pastoring a church without children.

You know, a big part of what I and the other leaders of this church are busy building has to do with the next generations. We all want this to be a place worth coming to for our children and their children. Why? Because we believe that God has plans that will live on beyond the current generation. That's why I am so excited that we are adding a former associate of mine, the Rev. Bunny Oliver to our staff to be our Children's Minister. She is amazing and just the kind of person we need to work with Judith and Kathy and Don and our Family Life Committee to build our children's program.

I will close with one more story; this one is from the life of Dennis Donoghue of Rowley, Massachusetts:

I'd had it with teaching. I worked with "difficult" kids and was never sure how much I'd accomplished. I wanted a physical job where I could see the fruits of my labor and wouldn't bring the work home with me.

So I took a job delivering packages. I wore a brown uniform and carried a clipboard. At first I enjoyed the work, especially returning at the end of the day with an empty truck. But then my supervisor began to time me, insisting I drive faster and deliver more packages. I also realized that most of the packages contained junk that people would be better off without. I began to miss teaching in particular the look on a kid's face when he or she finally figured out how to divide fractions or walk away from a fight.

One day I delivered several boxes of textbooks to a junior high school. I was standing at the principal's desk with my clipboard, waiting for him to get off the phone. "Where in God's name am I going to find a certified special-education teacher two months into the school year?"

I gave him his answer.

How wonderful that our lives often give us second chances. Very meaningful do- overs. Opportunities to go deeper. Opportunities to leave a legacy that is equivalent to our gifts.

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Amen