

“Watchful Waiting”

Mark 13.24–37

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 30 November 2008

Apocalyptic eschatology. Sounds pretty daunting doesn't it? And if you aren't familiar with the term, don't worry. The first word, “Apocalypse,” is sometimes misused in English to mean something horrendous happening. And actually, it means something being revealed. “*Apo*” means away in Greek, and “*kaluptein*” is to cover, so *apokalupsis* is to uncover. And the second word comes from “*eschatos*,” which means last. So, apocalyptic eschatology is the idea that something ultimate is being revealed.

Some scholars see Jesus as a prophet who came to proclaim the end of the earth. (And the author of this morning's gospel lection, who was probably writing in the years immediately after Rome had sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple, probably thought the end was near.) But if the final aspect of human history was meant to unfold before the first generation of Christians was to pass away, somebody's sense of timing was a bit off.

But, maybe the ultimate or final stage of human history or last things looks less like a “Left Behind” novel and more like an utterly unthinkable and unexpected happening: the start of a new way of thinking, living, being, feeling, understanding. Perhaps it is regime change on a cosmic scale. Maybe, just, maybe... it's about a new world order introduced not by a wizened old emperor, but by a peasant child from a backwater town.

This thought that perhaps the “final things” refer to the kingdom of God among us is not something I made up, but rather an idea called “*realized* eschatology.” And I presume that this is the reason that the folks who designed the lectionary chose to put this passage in the lectionary for the beginning of Advent. Because we are still waiting and looking *outside* ourselves for something that is *already within and among us*: something that Jesus uncovered – revealed – 2,000 years ago. Perhaps that was the *apokalupsis* and we didn't notice, because it wasn't quite what we were expecting to be revealed. But, then again, Jesus was hardly the messiah people were expecting either.



So, where does that leave us today? If Jesus announced and revealed the kingdom of God, why are we still meant to be watchful and wait? Are we expecting the second coming sometime soon? The second millennium has come and gone, and nothing cosmic seemed to happen.

I wonder if in all of our watching and waiting, our gaze has been fixed on the wrong place. We've been looking into the heavens when we ought to have been looking within our own souls. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, the kingdom of God is within you.”¹ The inner journey is not always an obvious or an easy path to tread, and few of us can do it alone, which is one of the reasons we rely on one another as companions along the way.

I was outside with my new puppy, Chumley, at about 6:30 on Thanksgiving morning. And looking east across Rolland Moore Park I saw and heard a huge flock of Canada geese flying southward, honking, urging each other on. And I marveled at the miracle of this migration. They are hard-wired to go in a certain direction at certain points each year. And it made me wonder if we, like geese, have a sense of direction...if we are meant to fly to our spiritual home at this time of year as we prepare.

Advent is our season of pilgrimage, of spiritual migration, of wandering along a path that encourages us to look *inside* ourselves to try and uncover something. It requires us to be both watchful and patient.

¹ Luke 17.21

There is a story in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* about three Irish monks who came ashore in Cornwall. They had set themselves adrift in a small wood-framed boat called a coracle in a self-imposed exile to spread the word of God wherever they landed. When Alfred, King of Wessex, asked them why they had come, they replied, “We stole away because we wanted for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, we cared not where.”

An Anglican priest, David Adam, writes, “The desire to go on pilgrimage for the love of God reflects the same yearning to extend one’s life and to find not only meaning, but one’s true home.”² Is it the object of our migration – our spiritual home – that we long for when we flock to church during Advent and Christmas?

The deep yearning within the human soul takes on many different forms. In its most basic sense, we have physiological yearnings for water, air, food, and shelter. We have social needs for friendship, attachment, and love. We have intellectual and aesthetic needs for stimulation, growth, and beauty. And we have spiritual needs as well. I don’t know if the great 20th century psychologist Abraham Maslow would have included spiritual yearnings within his famous hierarchy of needs, but I’d say that our longing for relationship with God is buried within every human soul.

It is the longing within us that cries out for us to be aware and watchful. And the church universal has not always been useful in trying to satisfy our spiritual longings. We haven’t always helped people learn how to have a prayer life or develop spiritual disciplines that satisfy some of our inner yearnings to become closer to God. I think that’s one of the reasons so many young people find Buddhism so attractive: at least initially, it seems less about doctrine and more about finding ways of meditation that bring us into closer touch with the sacred. (Though, if some of our young people sat in *zazen* for an hour or two with the *Zendo* that meets at Plymouth each Saturday morning and lived the life of a mendicant Buddhist monk, it may not seem much “kinder and gentler” than chanting and sitting in silence for a half-hour Taizé service.) Maybe when people talk about being “spiritual, but not religious,” what they are saying is that religion has not been helpful to them in finding their migratory path toward what they long for the most.

The longing is not just a sentiment, a feeling, a belief, or a thought. It is a kernel at the heart of who we are as people, as created beings.

One of my favorite authors, John O’Donohue, a former Catholic priest and philosopher who died early this year, writes that “It is in our thinking that the depth of our longing comes to expression. This longing can never be fulfilled by any one person, project, or thing. The secret immensity of the soul is the longing for the divine. This is not simply a haunted desire for an absent, distant divine presence that is totally different from us. Our longing is passionate and endless because the divine calls us home to presence. Our longing is an echo of the divine longing for us.”³



If we take the idea of the incarnation – God coming into human form – seriously, what stronger indication do we have of the divine longing for relationship with us? God comes to us in many guises, and gives us glimpses of God’s self in many ways. But coming into human history in the form of an infant is an invitation for us to be watchful and to keep awake for the moments when we can be drawn toward spiritual wholeness within ourselves and among us.

² David Adam, *A Desert in the Ocean*. (NY: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 17.

³ John O’Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Celtic Reflections on Our Yearning to Belong*. (NY:HarperCollins, 1999), p. 96.

Advent is our season of pilgrimage, of spiritual migration, of wandering along a path that encourages us to look inside ourselves to try and uncover something – an *apokalupsis*.

As we hear the beating of their wings and the honking of their many voices, may the Canada geese remind us that we, too, are migratory creatures. And that in this season of watchful waiting for the Christ in our midst, we are beckoned to our spiritual home.

Amen.