

Setting Our Priorities: Watchfulness

Mathew 24:36-44
December 2, 2007

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

A friend of mine, a pastor in North Carolina, sent me a poem the other day. I have to preface it by saying that it's not a poem that I have much appreciation for. It's based on belief in the "Rapture," which is a belief that I don't quite embrace. The Rapture is the theological belief that evangelical, Pentecostal, and literalist Christians have that prior to Jesus' return and the battle of Armageddon, some people will be magically plucked from this earth and taken to heaven so that they can avoid the violence and tribulations of those times. Others will be left behind. I don't embrace the idea of the Rapture because I don't think it is scripturally accurate, and because I'm not an evangelical, Pentecostal, or literalist. I also believe that the Rapture, which is based on our passage for this morning, takes our passage for this morning and interprets into it beliefs I don't think were part of what Jesus was trying to say in our passage.

So, here's the poem:

*Twas the night of the Rapture and all through the house
Not a creature was praying, not one in the house.
Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care
Thinking that Jesus would not soon be there.*

*The children were dressing to crawl into bed,
Not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.
And Mom in her rocker with baby in lap
Was watching the Late Show while I took a nap.*

*When out of the East there arose such a clatter,
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash!*

*When what to my wondering eyes should appear,
Up in the sky I saw Jesus was here!
With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray,
I knew in a moment this must be THE DAY!*

*The light of His face made me cover my head,
It was Jesus returning just like He had said.
And though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth,
I cried when I saw Him in spite of myself.*

*In the Book of Life, which He held in His hand,
The names of every saved woman and man.
He spoke not a word as He searched for my name;
When He said "you're not here" my head hung in shame.*

*The people whose names He had written with love
He gathered to take to His Father above.
With them he rose straight up from the ground,
Leaving the lost just standing around.*

*I fell to my knees, but it was too late;
I had waited too long and thus sealed my fate.
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight;
Oh, if only I'd been ready tonight.*

*In the words of this poem the meaning is clear;
The coming of Jesus is drawing so near.
There's only one chance and when comes the last call
We'll find that the Bible was true after all!*

This poem makes me cringe. I suppose an evangelical or Pentecostal Christian would say that the poem makes me cringe because I'm worried about being left behind. But that's not what makes me cringe. I'm not that worried about my eventual fate. No, it makes me cringe because it goes against what I believe the gospels teach. It presents Jesus as some sort of capricious judge who is mainly interested in how well we've read the Bible. Remember that in the poem the dividing line between those taken and those left behind is between those whose Bible isn't collecting dust on a shelf, and those who *know* and *believe* what the Bible says. But this doesn't exactly jibe with the gospels' account of Jesus, who reaches out to and saves those who don't fit the label of righteous. The gospels are full of stories and parables in which those people that the religiously righteous thought were sinful were declared good and justified by Jesus. Also, the other thing that makes me cringe about this poem is that it doesn't fit with my experiences of Jesus and his judgment. I had a dream twenty years ago, a dream that still feels so real to me, and one that I felt as though it contained a lesson straight from

Jesus. Fair or not, I base a lot of my sense of Jesus on my readings of the gospels, and of my experiences of Jesus in this dream.

In the dream I was in the middle of World War III. Russians were fighting the Americans in a final, Armageddon battle, and all other nations of the world were in the midst of the battle. The scene looked like something out of a combination of films like *The Terminator* and *The Planet of the Apes*, with a little bit of *Batman* thrown in (you'll see how in a second). It was night, and it was ominous. Missiles flew all around, as explosions shook everything. I was in my high school cafeteria along with a bunch of classmates, most of whom were not churchgoers, nor cared that much about religion. The front of the cafeteria had a huge picture window that allowed us to look outside and see the carnage that was taking place. We were all in a panic because the war was drawing nearer, and we didn't know what to do. Soon the war would engulf the cafeteria and we would die.

Suddenly, at the back of the cafeteria, Jesus appeared. He was standing there and motioning for everyone to follow him to safety. The back wall slid open, revealing poles much like what you saw on the television show, *Batman*, when Bruce Wayne pushed a secret button so that he could slide down the batpole into the batcave. Jesus was inviting everyone to jump onto these poles, through which they could slide down a pole to safety. Everyone ran to the back and jumped onto the poles, sliding out of sight. I was the only one left. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to just assume that I was to be saved. Finally, I tugged on Jesus' robe and asked him if I was allowed to slide down a pole to safety. Jesus looked at me as if to say that the answer was obvious, and then he said, "Of course. That's why I came. I came not only to save all of them, but also you. I came to save everyone. I even came to save the people out there, but they want war too much to pay attention to me." I slid down the pole, and the dream ended.

I believe that the Jesus of my dream was much more consistent with the Jesus of the gospel than the Jesus of the poem is. Think about the nature of Jesus in the poem. Would you say that this Jesus was loving? He seems more judgmental to me. Would you say that this Jesus cast a wide net to bring everyone into God's saving grace? To me he seemed to only care about those whose beliefs were "right," who knew the "right" things, and who had read the Bible the "right" way. His actions weren't based so much on grace and love as they were on whether people could pass his Bible and theology exam.

In fact, my main problem with the poem is that the motivating emotion it plays on is fear, not faith. The trouble with this kind of poem, with the *Left Behind* series, and with the whole focus on the Rapture, is that they are rooted in fear, not faith. And they encourage self-focus, not other focus. The driving message of the poem is "save yourself, otherwise you'll suffer terrible pain, turmoil, and violence." Come to Jesus so you won't be have to die a horrible death. Come to Jesus so that you won't suffer. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

As I read this passage, I sensed that Jesus was focusing on something different. I don't think he was trying to make people afraid as much as he was just telling people to wake up and be ready in every moment of life. Live your life with urgency. Live as though each day could be the last. Don't wait until the last moment to love others, to have compassion, to live a life of service, and to open up your life to God. Don't wait until you are face-to-face with Christ after death to play catch-up with life. Live each day prepared to love and to share God's grace with others.

Ultimately I think the lesson of this passage for us and for the people of Jesus' day was to put God first. It is about prioritizing our lives. The fact is that most of modern Americans live lives that are out of balance. Their lives lack the proper priority. Think about the kinds of things that people in our culture make a priority: wealth, clothes, houses, cars, prestige, popularity, celebrity, possessions, money, and things like that. All of these are temporary things that die when we die, at least for the most part. Are they what God wants us to put first? I'm not saying that these things are unimportant. All I'm asking is whether they should be put first.

What kinds of things do you think Jesus would tell us that we should we make a priority? Love? Compassion? Charity? Service? Prayer? Worship? Faith? This is the point of this passage: make love a priority, make God a priority, make worship a priority, make giving a priority. Live your life as though you have to come face to face with Christ today because you don't know when you'll have to face Christ. Live it as though, if you were to face Christ today, you could review your life with him and both rejoice, saying "What great life this was." If you came face-to-face with Christ today and looked at your life, what would Jesus see as your priorities?

Amen.