



Awaiting Today
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Isaiah 64: 1-9
 Mark 13: 24-37

Where exactly are you right now? Where is your attention? Where might your mind be wandering; maybe not now, but five minutes from now, what might you find yourself thinking about? I guess the trite, preacherly thing to say is that I hope you're all about, say, 15 to 60 feet in front of you, hanging on my every word, but you know, I know better. Some of you are about three feet in front of you, checking that phone, yep, just about 30 more minutes of worship. Some are already in tomorrow, dreading the beginning of a new work week, already tackling the next project. And some are hanging on to something in the past, that argument we had last night, the look he had in his eyes, a text received from a forgotten friend, a memory of someone who won't be home this Christmas, or who isn't here anymore. Isn't it strange, that we live thrown in so many directions, simultaneously forward and backward, casting ourselves into the future, at the same time tethered to our past? Where are you right now?

We get stuck sometimes; we all do. Some days we live so much in our future that we forget to live right now, wishing ourselves into another life: 15 pounds thinner, ten thousand more a year, 5 more years to retirement. We live on hope, imagination, dreams, and plans. If I could just... what? If I could just be... what? Sometimes it's the past we try to run away from; time heals, time forgets, but sometimes we dream about the future to forget our past, because we are stuck somewhere in the past, and trying desperately to move on. There's nothing wrong with it, of course, but I wonder, does it ever all stop? Are you aware of where you are, who you are, the people around you, the day, this morning, this moment, this very moment? Is there room for today in your dreams?

It's no surprise to us that our ancestors in the faith dreamed dreams, held onto the faith of a better tomorrow. They lived both here and not here. Here, for Isaiah, is the place of the hidden God: right now "you have hidden your face from us"; God seems to have abandoned us, "delivered us into the hand of our iniquity." Isaiah, this Isaiah, was a part of the Israelites returning from exile, finding Jerusalem decimated after the Babylonian invasion. They were forced from their home, made to live in a foreign land, but then the Israelites were allowed to return, only to find their hopes met with hardship, delay, the ruins of their once great land. Their anguish now seeks an answer from on

high, casting their lots with the future return of God, not yet here. They find themselves looking up: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

Apocalyptic minded folks might find it discouraging that Mark was written half a millennium after the last chapters of Isaiah. Five hundred years and Scripture is still telling us to look up, this time Jesus and his disciples, in what is sometimes referred to as Mark’s ‘Little Apocalypse’: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory,” a reference to the book of Daniel, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Like Isaiah, the community that produced the Gospel of Mark was in a difficult place. In the beginning of the chapter, Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, then the persecution of the disciples, and finally, the coming of the Son of Man. But there’s a bit of slight of hand going on here, because most scholars place the writing of Mark right at about the time that Rome destroyed the Jerusalem temple during an uprising and the Jewish Christians were thrown out of the synagogues. So, we have a retroactive prophesy here: a Gospel of Jesus Christ, putting words into Jesus’ mouth about things already happening. The book speaks of the present misery, the Temple destroyed, the ongoing persecution. It looks back to Jesus’s life and words, it looks around at things happening in the present, and it also looks forward. Jesus predicts the coming of the Son of Man after these things, after this suffering: keep awake for his coming! The Gospel is just like life, backward and forward looking, with an eye to the here and now.

It tells us that faith also looks forward. Backward and forward, keeping watch today, but looking ahead to the promises of God. What do you think of those promises? We live so much outside of ourselves, so much into future hopes, past memories, but at the same time, I wonder if the hopes of Isaiah, the hopes of Mark, if they put a bad taste in your mouth. Mainline Christians like ourselves, we tend not to pay much attention to Mark’s ‘Little Apocalypse,’ the Book of Daniel, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter, the book of Revelation, all those passages about the return of Jesus at the end of time. It’s hard to read them in 2017 and not think about predictions about the end of the world: William Miller thought it was coming 1844, Joseph Smith in 1891, Jerry Farwell in 1999, countless others. We eschew much of that second coming talk because often it is used to distract us from the cares of this world. Looking for a final release, for the Son of Man coming from the clouds, that Son of Man, that hope, can be just another way of casting ourselves into the future to forget the present, to forget the past. It can be a way of saying that all of it doesn’t matter. It’s just going to fade away. What is this moment, what is

history, in the face of eternity? “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.”

Contemporary journalist and philosopher Ta-Nehisi Coates writes a letter to his son in his book *Between the World and Me*, a letter about life as a black man in our world of white racism. He reminds his son:

I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone.

You must struggle to truly remember this past,” Coates tells his son. “You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never redeem this.”¹

To the extent that I let myself acknowledge slavery, that white Christians acknowledge this history, we distance ourselves from it, turning it into this mass of misery and shame in the past. We move on; thinking about how things are better today, how we weren't a part of what happened then, as if today, or maybe tomorrow, are somehow a redemption to what once was, as if slavery doesn't deserve ongoing reckoning, not just remembrance but reckoning, repentance for the sins of our ancestors, lament for countless slaves, names lost to history. Do you know that slaves were once sold in Pack Square Park, where a monument now stands bearing the name of our town's most famous slave-holder? No coming Son of Man is going to erase the wrongs done in slavery, Jim Crow, *de jure* discrimination and the racism of today. A hundred years of

¹ These sections can be found in Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “Letter to My Son,” *The Atlantic* July 4, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>

abolition does not redeem slavery, and we see the consequences of pretending like it never happened playing out every day today. We can't dream our way out of this past, this present.

You see, faith that looks forward is not a faith that forgets; it does not mirror the convenient amnesia prevalent today. What do we try to forget when we look forward? What injustices, oppressions, or, on a smaller scale, what problems and issues? Is there something unsettled that you are trying to run away from by casting yourself into the future? Is there room for today in your faith? So often the prophecies of Jesus made at the end of his life have been read as warnings to keep our eyes fixated only on the sky, waiting for something to come down and make everything right. But this looking forward can be a temptation to forget, to escape from today, and from yesterday, to fall asleep. It's no coincidence that hopes are often called dreams after all. The sleeping mind can take us somewhere we are not currently. But here the words of Jesus are quite the opposite: "Keep Awake! Or else the Son of Man may find you asleep." We do not dream our way out of the troubles of today. We serve a God who remembers, who cherishes all lives and life itself, especially life that is thrown away, forgotten, told it doesn't or didn't matter.

And yet expectation remains a part of the faith; it is central to the faith. We Christians believe in something bigger than ourselves; we find hope in a God who is love, who is justice; we hope that love is bigger than the biggest institution, that justice is more powerful than all the earthly powers that touch us, that can eat away at us, that marginalize and pummel our neighbors and the children of God every day, near and far. We believe that life is stronger than death. That our lives have meaning beyond our lifetime here on earth. Hope is central to the Christian faith, hope that the cross was not just the execution of an insurrectionist, that the meal he shared with his disciples on the night of his arrest was not just one man's last meal, but rather the very self-giving of God to all.

In the Babylonian Talmud, there is a rabbinic legend about the rabbi Joshua Ben Levi and the prophet Elijah. *Rabbi Joshua asks the prophet: "When will the messiah come?" and Elijah replies, "Go, ask him yourself." – "Where is he?" asks the Rabbi – "At the gates of Rome." – "How can I recognize him?" – And Elijah says "He is sitting between the poor laden with diseases; all the rest are unbinding their wounds all at once and then rebinding them, but he is unbinding them one at a time and rebinding them one at a time, because he thinks: 'Perhaps I will be needed and there must be no delay.'*" At this Rabbi Joshua went to the Messiah and said, "Peace be with you, Lord and Master! When will you come?" and the Messiah answered: "Today." Then Rabbi Joshua

*returned to Elijah, who asked him, “What did he tell you?” The Rabbi replied, “The Messiah lied to me, because he said he would come today, but he did not come.” Elijah replied: “This is what he meant: If today you would listen to his voice.”*²

Well there you have it: you go and meet the Messiah, you ask him when he is coming, he says today and then doesn't show up.

But things are not all they seem. Elijah, in the rabbinic legend, is asking the Rabbi to see eternity differently through the lens of faith, not just an in-breaking, coming down from the clouds, splitting open the sky with armies of angels type of eternity. Not a coming that ends time, that washes it all away, but a place where the present and God's future meet, where God's endless love and the present turmoil meet, where God enters and speaks and God asks us to listen, an eternity that calls to us and asks us to respond. The Messiah will come if you but listen to his voice says Elijah.

Advent, right now, advent today, Advent 2017, this time of waiting, of preparation for the return of our Lord, I wonder if the groaning for our coming Lord, our desire to move out of this present time, is louder than in years past. Perhaps not. Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us it is all too easy to white-wash the past. But Advent right now, when we hear of hundreds killed in a Mosque terror attack; when we hear about a mass shooting every month, sometimes every week; when we hear that an already weak safety net is going to be gutted by tax cuts; when 60,000 Haitians, who have called America home for seven years are suddenly told they are no longer welcome; when women across this nation speak out that harassment and violence are a part of their daily existence and men act like we are surprised; I wonder if our Advent groans are a bit louder this year than in years past.

The good news of the apocalypse is that God is coming; we have to wait, but not long, because God is coming today, if we but listen to God's voice, God's voice that calls us to love, to grace, to remembrance, to remember that God gave God's very self, **(point to table)**. Jesus gave us himself so we can stop forgetting. Jesus gave us himself so that we can stop running away from our present. Jesus gave us himself, so that with certainty, when everything points in the other direction, we can nonetheless proclaim redemption, deliverance, justice. What does God's future demand of you today? Today, in expectation, in waiting, in faith, let's stay awake.

² Parable and interpretation adapted from Bieler, Andrea and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). p. 30-31.

