

The world is about to turn

Lead Pastor Cynthia Lapp
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Isaiah 2:1-5

Matthew 24: 36-44

The World is about to turn! We know that. We see the leaves falling off the trees; we feel the temperature drop, at least slightly. But there are other changes too. President Bush called together leaders of 50 countries this past week to talk about peace between Palestine and Israel, and they showed up.

Turning. Slight, but perceptible change is around us all the time. It is during Advent each year that we are called to pay special attention. But we are called not only to watch and wait. We are called to participate in that change.

The scriptures today seem to give us two contrasting images of what to watch for, what the change might look like. The Matthew passage is often used as a sketch of what the future holds for people personally. This passage has been used to scare people, literally terrorize them into being Christians. You might remember these verses as they were put to song:

Man and Wife asleep in bed, she hears a noise and turns her head - he's gone, I wish we'd all been ready.

Two men walking up a hill, one disappears and one's left standing still, I wish we'd all been ready.

There's no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you've been left behind. (verse 2 from "I wish we'd all been ready" by Larry Norman)

Didn't you sing that one at church camp or for special music with the youth group? Those of you of a certain age?

Another compelling image from these verses in Matthew is of the homeowner staying awake to catch a burglar. "A Thief in the Night" was the title of a movie shown in many churches in the 1970s. I saw it in fourth or fifth grade at the Baptist church my neighbors attended. It depicts the last days of the world, when there will be wars and violence and you don't know whom to trust. Of course today's kids have their own movies and books to instill fear in them through the Left Behind series. In the '70s version, the thing to be really afraid of was bar codes because they were going to be tattooed on your wrist or forehead. (I can still see the scene where the teenage girl goes to buy food at the store and the clerk asks to see her "sign" so she can make her purchase.) Talk about nightmares.

I am here to say that this passage from Matthew has been abused. It has been used as a weapon. Its chief function has been to scare people into becoming Christians, not necessarily followers of Christ.

An alternate meaning, a more accurate understanding of this passage, is as a graphic description of the difficulty in knowing when the world is about to turn, when God in Christ is about to re-enter the world. While it is clear from these verses in Matthew and II Peter (3) and Luke (21) and others that we are to watch for “signs” it is not clear why some people vanish and others remain. In this passage it is not readily apparent whether it is better to suddenly disappear or to stay behind. (Ideas from Out in Scripture for Dec. 2, 2007) All we are given is “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”

We can watch and wait like the homeowner who stays up to try and catch a thief, or we can go about our daily tasks like people did in the days of Noah, eating and drinking, finding partners and having families. The writer here tells us that whether we are watchful or oblivious – God comes. We don’t get any inside information on when it might happen.

There are some Christians whose main concern is the future, the “last days.” Sometimes just for fun I listen to Christian radio. Just last evening I heard a very earnest preacher describing how we are in the last days. He did admit that the Bible tells us we will never know the time or place for the end. But it was also abundantly clear that this preacher had cracked the code. He quoted this passage from Matthew because it is a “troubling passage” and it is indecipherable.

I think it is pretty clear. These verses acknowledge the reality that there have always been people who attempt to predict with precision the end of the world. We are told here that it is none of our business. We are to be concerned with how we live now and from that vantage point to watch for the in-breaking of God. But as Matthew tells us: the angels don’t know, Jesus doesn’t know, no one knows but God, the Creator of heaven and Earth.

Isaiah has a very different vision of the future. Some translations say this will happen in “the last days” though it is argued that he is not talking specifics, just holding out a vision for “the days to come.” The image is not so much personal as political. Diverse peoples from all over the world will stream to God’s mountain seeking reconciliation. All people will allow their disputes to be arbitrated by God and all weapons will be transformed into agricultural implements. We will find peace and salvation together.

This is a vision to hang on to. And clearly the people of Israel did. It appears almost verbatim in three different books. In Micah 4 and Joel 3 we find very similar descriptions to this vision from Isaiah 2.

Swords beat into plowshares, spears turned into pruning hooks. This kind of recycling is more than practical. It becomes a creative and radical statement about our long-term ideas of what will be needed in society. What would the world be like if Hummers turned into tractors, if army bases turned into hospitals and universities, not just for military personnel but for everybody?

Isaiah's prophetic vision does not go so far as to say there will no longer be disagreements. It does not say this will be the end of all difference. But people will come to ask God to judge and solve their disputes rather than training for war and pursuing bloodshed.

While this vision is one I want to believe in, what do we do in the in-between time? How do we ever get to peace without a divine arbitrator? It is hard to imagine even protestants, Catholics and Anabaptists gathered together at God's mountain, never mind Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and countless other religious traditions. What about atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins who have no interest in anything divine and even less interest in those who claim to follow God's ways? We are a long, long way from all peoples streaming to God's holy mountain yet we proclaim that the world is about to turn.

We know that, literally, the world is always turning. Right now the world is turning so that here in the northern hemisphere the days are getting shorter and the nights are getting longer. We are turning toward darkness, some might say spiritually as well as meteorologically. But what we learn from the earth and skies is that the night will not always rule. Light will come again. In a matter of months we will again feel the warmth of the sun directly above us for hours and hours each day.

In this season when the world is literally turning toward darkness our Christian tradition calls us to turn toward the light. We could name all the reasons that it seems that darkness is overtaking us – politically, personally, in numerous countries throughout the world, in the larger church, in our own homes, in our own bodies ...

But we are not asked to turn alone. The good news is that we are invited to join together as the body of Christ to shine light in the darkness. As individual bodies we are called to become the body of Christ and bring light to the world. It is Christ's light that we wait for, Christ's light that we watch for, Christ's light in which we participate.

The service committee is proposing one concrete step toward turning for us as a congregation. Each Sunday during Advent and Christmas we will take an offering to share with a refugee family that we will help to resettle in this community in the months to come. This is a small but significant way that we can shine light.

Yesterday many of you came to rake and clean up the church property. Quite a few folks from Iglesia that worships here Sunday afternoons joined in the effort. This is another small light; working together across cultures, languages and theologies, building respect and friendship.

As usual when taking the Bible seriously, I am left with a host of questions: How do we do live this wholeness and peace in our families? In our workplaces? In our situation with Allegheny Mennonite Conference? Is it as impossible as Isaiah's image? Can this turning of the world toward justice and peace, wholeness and light happen without us? Does God work in ways other than through humans?

We need not apologize for the questions, they are part of the turning too. Even with these lingering wonderings we are invited to watch and wait, to be part of the turning of the world.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!
O house of Menno, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!