

Your Redemption is Drawing Near

A sermon preached on Luke 21:25-36 on Sunday, December 1, 2024,
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I.

What is saving your life right now?

This question's popularity comes with a history of its own. As legend has it, beloved Baptist-turned-Episcopalian pastor, John Claypool, asked it once to an up and coming Episcopalian pastor-turned-writer-and-speaker, Barbara Brown Taylor. She was there to speak in his parish, and when Barbara asked John, "what do you want me to talk about?" John smiled and said wisely, "why don't you just talk about what is saving your life right now." She found that question to be so useful, so in-the-present and local that it became one she widely used, a question that is now asked by podcasters and bloggers and writers and pastors across the internet and the world.¹ It evokes answers both frivolous and serious. "What's saving my life right now" might be a certain new show on Netflix or a skincare product for chapped hands. It also might be backyard play with kids and sitting at the bedside of a beloved.

What is saving **your** life right now?

II.

Salvation comes from a Hebrew word meaning literally "to make wide" or "to make sufficient."² Jesus adds "to make well" to the meaning of salvation as he heals and teaches. Salvation means to save, to be delivered from, to make wide and sufficient and well the path to wholeness in place of the narrow, scarce, and ill path upon which we walk.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/barbara-brown-taylor-this-hunger-for-holiness/>

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p19.

It doesn't take long in a life of following Jesus on that path to understand that all humanity – yes, even little ole you and me – is in need of saving. Now for you, “salvation” may evoke childhood church memories of the preacher preaching against the eternal stain of individual sins, like the beer you snuck at age 16 or the time you stole a piece of candy from the convenience store. But scripture tells us that the sin from which we need saving isn't merely individual. Rather, we also need saving from the broken state of the world, from the ways of death and malevolence, from all that twists and distorts and deforms and blots out the way of Love from the way humanity is living. It becomes a “salve,” as Debie Thomas says, “for everything that ails God's world: our failures and their pernicious effects, yes, but also our wounds, our hungers, our thirsts, our aches, our losses, our terrors, our traumas, our deaths.”³

Salvation, you see, is intimately personal and infinitely universal. It is work we simply cannot do ourselves, no matter how many plans for spiritual improvement we follow or protests for justice we organize. We are not the subject of salvation; Jesus is. And another word for his salvation is redemption.

III.

“Now when these things begin to take place,” Jesus says to the disciples near the end of his life, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” These things he speaks of were signs and wonders that scholars call “apocalyptic.” We might hear “apocalypse” and think “horror” or “calamitous collapse of all we know to be true.” But our scriptures remind us that “apocalypse” is neither horror nor disaster, but

³ Debie Thomas, *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity*, p95.

rather is an unveiling, a revealing, a disclosure. Apocalypse is more possibilities than catastrophes, more uncovering than collapsing.

Yet when presented with theories and texts such as these, it's only human to want to figure out these signs and wonders. In the context of our gospel text for today, that was the case for the disciples then and disciples now. The human brain is uncomfortable with ambiguity. So when Jesus tells generations of the faithful that "there will be signs in the sun the moon, and the stars;" there will be "on earth, distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves;" there will be people "faint[ing] from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken" – of course we've spent generations trying to figure it out, tying this fantastical event with the sun or that devastating hurricane with the end. Of course we've forecasted and theorized and predicted, especially around turns of centuries or millennia! Of course we've tried to connect the dots and map the movements and explain away the phenomena and prep as though the end is imminent! It vindicates us, all the while centering our little stretch in the yawn of time.

Yet on the other side, it's just as human to scoff, to mock the movements and ignore the signs and demythologize warnings like these. Many Christians would remind you that followers of Jesus have used apocalyptic words for generations in part to justify inaction on earth and passive acceptance of injustice because "the end is drawing near." But is it really? The world keeps turning!, we say. So of course we've overlooked predictions out of disdain. Of course we've grown cynical and listless. Of course we've repressed our fear and our dread, burrowing our heads in the ground. Of course we've rolled our eyes and carried right on with our living. It

vindicates us, all the while assuming that our little stretch in the yawn of time is nothing special.⁴

I confess I'm more of the eye-roller than the doomsday-prepper. I won't ask for a show of hands at where you'd fall. Yet this year for me – and perhaps for you too – I'm finding that both of these approaches fall short. Neither meet the moment for me. For I'm yearning for something to be revealed that presses hope through the dark, cold ground like a new shoot bursting out from a deadened stump. I'm hungry for an unveiling to overhaul the absurd. I need the promise of a way of living where that arc of the moral universe has already bent completely to justice. I need a world where that arc bends for my gay neighbors, and trans neighbors, and immigrant neighbors, and homeless neighbors, and forgotten neighbors, and addicted neighbors, and impoverished neighbors, and imprisoned neighbors, so they can live with freedom instead of fear. I need isolationism to give way to community, individualism to surrender into interdependence, the rulers and ruled to be liberated. I need to be saved not just **from** the sufferings of this life but **for** another way of living. I need for hope to matter, for war to yield into peace, for joy to come without a fight, for love to win at the end. I need an apocalypse. *I need redemption.*

It's good news, then, that when God came near as a baby, God revealed the nature of the divine, and that nature was love. But the good news doesn't end there. Jesus reminds us that the divine disclosure didn't just happen once when Word became flesh. For Christ will come again. Again, God will be revealed. Again, God will save. But this time, God will come not as a human,

⁴ With gratitude to my friend, Dr. John Carter, for introducing me to a new theological read on apocalypse and hope by Dale Aukerman, *Reckoning with Apocalypse: Terminal Politics and Christian Hope*. His description of human responses to apocalyptic times was most helpful to me this week!

but as a way of life. A dream no longer deferred. A kingdom where the tables are wide and crowded. A drawing together of all things, all creation, all people, all places, all time into God's heart, where God will dwell with us, wiping every tear from our eyes. Where death will be no more, where mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Where this world passes away, so God can make all things new again. Where all we know will be ordered by love, not power; by eternity, not modernity; by truth, not conspiracies; by hope, not dread; by justice, not injury. Salvation. Redemption drawing near.

IV.

This year, our church's experience of Advent will hang on the phrase "words for the beginning." So let me ask – What beginning are you longing for? What do you need to be saved from so that you can be saved for? What redemption will be your new beginning?

"Look at the fig tree and all the trees," Jesus says, answering the questions of the disciples before they ask. "As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So when you see these things taking place, you'll know the kingdom of God is near."

Look for the trees. Look for the leaves. Look for the signs, Jesus says. And in all the years since, Christians have done so. Greenery to call us to flourishing of seeds and stumps. Poinsettias to evoke the star on that cold Bethlehem night. Candles whose flames flicker like the light that shines in the darkness. Nativities to remind us of when God came near as a baby. And so on. And so on. Signs and symbols and wonders and remembrances to remind us not only of what God once did, but also of what God promises still to do. Of our redemption, our salvation, that is drawing near.

It's easy to find despair.

It's understandable to reach for fear.

It's tempting to fall into theories of the end or cynicism about the world that keeps turning.

But I wonder: *what if we looked instead for hope?*

Hope, Jesus says, keeps us awake. It stands us up and lifts our heads. It helps us to stay alert while we wait. It keeps our spirits attuned to what lies below the frostline, under what's hard-packed and frozen, buried deep into the ground just waiting to come to life. So if we looked for hope this Advent, I bet what we might find are shoots that spring forth from stumps, long since left for dead. Weapons to kill pressed into tools to grow. Wolves lying with lambs. Highways, once impassable, made clear. The powerful brought down, and the lowly lifted up. Justice that breaks forth like the dawn. A baby born so all may be whole and free.

So stand up, friends! Raise your heads! Your redemption is drawing near!