

## **“The Upward Way”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

November 8, 2020 – 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Gazing into the sky, the first followers of Jesus eagerly awaited his return from the heavens at any moment. And when that earliest generation of believers had passed on, the next generation of Christians still scanned the skies, awaiting the imminent return of their Savior. But as time went on, and Christ didn't return, his followers began to wonder *when* he would come back. By the time that today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew was composed, perhaps 50 years or so after the ascension of Christ to the sky, there had been quite a delay of this return from there. Some of the followers of Jesus began to wonder *if* he would return at all, some stopped scanning the skies, and for some, their lamps had run out of oil altogether.

Perhaps you, modern day Christian, were gazing into the sky before coming to church this morning. If not hoping for the return of Christ, at least to spot the International Space Station as it zoomed by at 4:42 a.m., just above the horizon to the north and moving to the east. I was not one of those people. Christine receives alerts on her phone whenever the station will be overhead indicating the time when the station will be in sight and the direction in which we should look to spot it. She often asks me, “Do you want to get up at 3:50 a.m. and Spot the Station?” My answer is reliably, “No!” But I do like to spot the station when it passes overhead when I'm already awake, and spotting the station is something we really love doing together. It really is amazing to think that folks are up there looking down upon us as we zoom by below them as we are down here gazing up at them as they zoom by above us. I wonder what they are wondering about as I'm wondering

about them. (You can join in on the fun by signing up to receive Spot the Station alerts at NASA's website).

Gazing into the skies in hope and wonder is something that is part of our tradition as followers of Christ, if not literally, at least figuratively. We still expect and await the return of Christ, and as we are moving towards the season of Advent, we pay attention to the ways that Christ is coming to us even now, calling us skyward even as we live on this earth and its gravity inevitably pulls us to the grave, for we are earthlings, made of the dust of the earth, and surely our bodies will return to the earth as dust. But we are also creatures of the sky, citizens of a heavenly realm, and Christ calls us to rise even as we walk the earth.

The writers of many of the words that have found their way into our Bible and are considered by us to be sacred literature, had the timeless, heavenly realms on their sights as well. This is especially so for those who gave us what are called apocalyptic texts. The term apocalyptic comes from the first word of the Book of Revelation, *apokalupsis* in the Greek language in which it was written, and it means an uncovering or revealing of something. Last week's scripture reading was from this book, the Revelation of John, and what was uncovered for us in it was a scene of all the followers of Christ throughout time gathering together to worship God along with all of creation. This beautiful, heavenly scene was revealed to us to pull us skyward, to help us, like the generations of Christ followers before us, to look beyond the ends of our noses and to see the spiritual realities that exist not only beyond us but among us.

As I mentioned last week, this scene, like others of the apocalyptic writings, was offered originally to people who were oppressed and suffering. In the day of John's writing of the Revelation, Christians were

being oppressed by the Empire of Rome. In the time of the apocalyptic writing of the Old Testament book of Daniel, the people of Israel were being oppressed by the Empire of Greece. There were many other apocalyptic writings produced by Jewish people in and around Palestine in the years before Jesus lived and in the first century or two after he did, parts at least of some 70 unique apocalyptic writings are known to us, and all of them were written to help people who were oppressed to gaze skyward in spirit to see a word that would give them hope for living even while they suffered.

Many passages of these heavenly, apocalyptic texts, like last week's reading from John's Revelation, are beautiful and hopeful. But many more passages in these texts are difficult to read. They incorporate symbolic language that is foreign to us, including symbolic numbers, characters, and events. I imagine that an extra-terrestrial alien would take a look at one of our political cartoons that utilizes symbolism that is commonly understood by us American earthlings, such as a donkey and elephant standing face to face on their hind legs with boxing gloves on their front legs, and be totally confused, wondering, 'A donkey and elephant boxing? What could be the meaning of this?' Well, we know the meaning of these symbols, so they're not really strange at all, but to someone unfamiliar with them, the image would seem absolutely bizarre.

If we had a literal interpretation of the Bible's symbolic language, it would be fantastically strange. And yet, that is what many of our fellow followers of Christ do. Christian fundamentalists and their spiritual descendants, Evangelicals, interpret these texts literally. I grew up as one of these, and so I am very familiar with this approach, held by most evangelicals today, known as Dispensational Premillennialism, which takes all of the different apocalyptic writings in the Bible, and with a literal reading of them, uses them to formulate a timeline of the end of

the world. I remember as a child receiving from my pastor a detailed chart that provided an amazingly complicated schematic for how the end of time was going to unfold. This theology produced the wildly popular *Left Behind* book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, which has now sold well over 65 million copies. The books are based on a movie series from the 1970s called *A Thief in the Night*, which had a title song by Christian rock artist Larry Norman, in which he sings, “There's no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you've been left behind.” The movies, like the *Left Behind* books that followed them, chronicle the pain and suffering of those who got left behind after Jesus returned to earth and took away the faithful. Plague after plague comes upon those poor souls who were left behind, so you do not want to be left behind! There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! In this world, the future, the end, is frightening stuff, and you are meant to get scared into heaven.

The earliest Christians, unlike our evangelical siblings, did not really understand literally the symbolic language of the apocalyptic writings, and to them, they weren't scary or strange at all. Apocalyptic symbolism was commonly understood and employed. Jesus himself used symbolic apocalyptic language. Today's reading from Matthew is part of what is known as the “Little Apocalypse,” which includes many of the same images and themes we find in the Book of Revelation. And our reading from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians does as well. Both of today's texts provide us with symbolic images of Christ's return. Rather than meaning to scare us into heaven, they are meant to give us hope and to encourage us to be faithful and vigilant, paying attention to the work of God in our midst. They call us to let our lamps burn, and to let them burn brightly, especially in the darkest places where light is needed. They call us to remember that we are people on an upward journey. We head to higher ground as we head to the sky.

I was reminded of this yesterday afternoon, when on the radio, I heard *Higher Ground* by Stevie Wonder. This wonderfully funky song was originally written by Stevie in 1973 about reincarnation, but he found new meaning in it after he almost died in a terrible car crash. After then, he understood his lyrics, “I’m gonna keep on tryin’ ‘til I reach my highest ground,” to be about using not just the next life or next lives to grow as a person, but to make the most of each moment in this life, to reach for higher ground now. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he said the song became for him one about having a “second chance for life, to do something or to do more, and to value the fact that I am alive.” Like Little Stevie, we should reach for higher ground in this life. Every new moment is a gift from God that we should use to head upwards towards the sky. Onward and upward we go!

Friends, we don’t know what the future holds, but we can be prepared for Christ’s continual and ultimate coming by keeping our lamps trimmed and burning as we journey upwards. Just as the oil in our candles must be refilled to be ready for our time of worship, you must be filled with spiritual oil for the journey ahead, so fill up your lamps and shine this day, through worship, prayer, service, doing God’s will to work towards the creation of a more just society and a world filled with more love. By doing these things, you will fill your lamps, and you will shine, and your lamps will be filled even more, and you will shine even more as you reach for higher ground. Amen.