

Fearless

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 23, 2023

Readings: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Sermon text: For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. Romans

The way Matthew tells the story, Jesus tells the crowd a number of parables about the kingdom, and then later, alone with the core disciples, he explains the meaning. Last week we heard the parable of the good soil, this week the parable of the weeds and the wheat, next week a few others; the mustard seed, the pearl of great price and so on. I think this illustrates two things. One, Jesus taught in parables, all the sources agree on this. Two, the disciples—and us—want to know the key to unlocking the meaning. I would just like to say, as with my critique of Paul's division of the righteous and unrighteous, believers and unbelievers that we heard last week from Romans, so Matthew has the secret meaning separate the weeds and wheat into evildoers and the righteous. One goes into the fiery furnace where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth (a locution Matthew is fond of), while the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

Side note, also tossed into the fire, "all causes of sin."

I would like to hold on to the parable, the original form of Jesus' teaching, but let go of the us versus them, righteous versus evildoers, saved versus damned, interpretation. I prefer to remember Paul's penetrating discussion of how each of us struggle with the law of the flesh, and his critique of those who would make righteousness the cause of salvation rather than God's mercy. Rather, as Paul notes, we are all fall short of fulfilling God's law, we are all sinners in need of redemption. We argues rather that when we believe, when we grasp the hope that is Christ, then we are saved—we have so to speak grabbed the lifeline that Christ represents. But this it seems to me in no way actually makes us sinless, capable of complete obedience to the law—on the contrary, we see daily how Christians and other people, fall prey to temptation. it is the human condition. We will not escape except through God's mercy. And that is what I am counting on. How about you?

Which doesn't mean we just give up trying to be good and brave and faithful. On the contrary. We are given strength for the fight. As Paul writes in today's portion of the letter to the Romans, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption."

And Paul goes on to say we share that spirit of adoption—of being and feeling part of God’s plan of ultimate redemption, God’s dream of a harmony in creation, of a new creation ruled by love and full of life, not fear and death and futility—with all creation. What an incredible thought: “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Wow, all creation, as well as we, are in the throes of giving birth to a new creation!

Did anyone see the new Mission Impossible movie? Tom Cruise as Ethan Hunt saving the world again, together with merry band. This time fighting against the forces of evil personified in an arch villain, dastardly killers, bumbling government agents, a clever and beautiful pickpocket swept into the action, all in pursuit of the key—a literal two part key—that unlocks the power and control knobs to the Entity.

What is the Entity? that is a little vague, but it is something like SkyNet, the artificial intelligence network that become conscious in the Terminator series. it sees all, knows all, anticipates every move, and is planning for world domination, using human agents as pawns until the day—one assumes—when it can dispense with the pretense and rule in solitary splendor.

If you think about it it is sort of an inverted prophecy of the new creation, a new form of shining children of God, a new form of life that is struggling to be born.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

That of course is the second stanza of W.B. Yeats's poem *The Second Coming*. with its often quoted description of a political situation—Yeats is talking about Ireland heading to civil war—

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Except Ethan Hunt who is certainly full of passionate intensity and the courage of his convictions. I will note that he has good Christian moral code, a good shepherd ethos. He tells the thief that if she joins the merry band he will [ut her life above his and not hesitate to give his life to save hers. He also demonstrates difficult compassion in sparing the life of one of the crazy killers.

Now let's not get carried away, he isn't exactly Harry Potter. But it is a morality tale. Also of course one of many warning about the dangers of artificial intelligence—and I am glad to see that the president and Congress are taking steps to help put guardrails around this rapidly accelerating technology—though whether there can be any stopping the pursuit of profit and competitive advantage and control though any means necessary is to be doubted, based on human history (see Oppenheimer for a lesson there).

But let us not despair. For in hope we are saved. We believe God has the world in hand. If you consider even the bleakest sort of government control apparatus in hand with corporate overlords leading a docile and fearful populace to the land of empty pleasure and mindless distraction—and lack of freedom and rich humanity. if you imagine a landscape too hot to venture outside in, while screens and pleasure pods distract most people while others do the hard work, the short lives, if all that happens—and it might—Christianity and humanism will still offer an alternative way. A wild Christianity—read Paul Kingsnorth on the machine and the Christian alternative—an ascetic rejection of mere pleasure, a fierce turn away from fear toward a natural world, a human and animal scale, a time pf wilderness and exile if needed—but we know from history and we know from prophecy—read Revelation—a remnant will endure, and the kingdom will be restored. It may be a mission impossible, but with God all things are possible.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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