

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 2, 2012
Advent 1
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zechariah 14:4-9
Psalm 50
I Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-31

[Disclaimer: I preach this sermon to myself. Others are welcome to listen in. If what I say from my own experience does not apply to you, then take it not to heart.]

Here we are once again in the season of Advent. This is often a difficult season for me, one reason being the biblical texts that come to us, and the claims and promises they make.

For example, in Luke's Gospel lesson today, we have Jesus' promise to his disciples that there will come a time of great tribulation and difficulty and trial and testing, and that during that time the Son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory. His appearance will inaugurate the redemption of his followers.

To most modern people, promises like this sound a bit like something you might read in a comic book, or a science fiction novel. Something you would encounter in a fairy tale or a movie. Yes, the part about the roaring of the seas and strange tides rings a bell, especially in the wake of super storm Sandy. But the part about Jesus coming in the clouds with power and great glory? For most moderns, that is the stuff of sheer *fantasy*.

And if I were utterly honest with you this morning, I would confess to you that the older I get, the more I sometimes find myself sharing the struggle of the modern age. In moments where I am tired or discouraged, I sometimes find myself struggling to hold on, to believe it's all true. In my lesser moments, the words of one of our Epworth hymns speaks about me when it says:

*Each winter as the year grows older, we each grow older too.
The chill sets in a little colder; the verities we knew seem shaken and untrue.*
(*Each Winter As the Year Grows Older*, v. 1; William Gay)

And so, as Advent approaches again, I'm confronted anew with this promise of Jesus. The promise that he is going to come again on the clouds with power and glory. And there are times when I wonder: *what if the whole thing is just a bit too good to be true?* (Remember the common sense adage that we all live by? E.g., "if something seems too good to be true, it probably is"?)

For modern people, this stuff sounds like something out of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Harry Potter*. It smacks of fairy tale.

In my reading this week I came across W.H. Auden's lengthy poem *For the Time Being*. Auden made me stop in my tracks with these words:

*We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible;
We who must die demand a miracle.*

When I read this, and read it again, it was like a new set of lenses had been held up to my tired eyes, and I saw this promise of Jesus' return differently.

Auden says, "nothing can save us that is possible; we who must die demand a miracle." I hear him saying that if you and I are to have any chance, we need something miraculous, something beyond ourselves, something beyond the confines of our puny human experience. If we are to have any hope of being saved, that hope lies beyond the realm of what is (humanly) possible.

Our experience confirms this, does it not? When you are on the brink of illness or failure or heartbreak or calamity or death, you become keenly aware that you are insufficient, that this world is temporary, and that you stand in desperate need not of the *possible*, but of the *miraculous*. You stand in need of salvation, and that which is merely *possible* cannot save.

And that's where Jesus' promise here -- the promise of Advent -- comes center stage. For this promise is indeed the stuff of fantasy, but not in the sense of being too good to be true. It is fantasy in the sense of *fantastical*, beyond our experience, extraordinary, not of this world!

The promise of Advent, the promise of the Gospel, offers us an impossible possibility, a reality that transcends everyday experience, a Truth deeper than everything we've been told is true, a story that stretches beyond our stories and encompasses them so as to give them meaning and purpose.

Think about it for a moment. Week in and week out, we preach and listen to a Gospel story that claims that there is a God who has created and who sustains this world. Each week I proclaim to you that not only does this God know that you exist, He actually gives a hoot, He actually cares deeply and passionately about you. He cares about your hopes, your dreams, your successes and your failures. He cares enough to send His only Son into the world to die so that you might have life.

From cover to cover, the Bible makes extraordinary, otherworldly claims and promises about God that are simply too good to be true. And yet, these promises are so good that when we hear them we just can't help but *believe* they are true, and live our lives accordingly.

I think at times I forget (we forget) just how bold, how audacious, how humanly ridiculous the claims and promises of the Gospel are. How contrary these promises can appear to our human reason and experience. No wonder the Apostle Paul calls it "foolishness." For the promise of Advent, the promise of the Gospel, isn't simply good news, it's news that is too good to be true. Or maybe -- just maybe -- it is news *so good that it must be true*.

Maybe J.R.R. Tolkien was right. Many years ago he wrote that the Gospel story is not only the perfect fairy tale, but is actually the root of all fantasy, because

it tells the deeply true and ultimately joyful story of humanity -- fallen and redeemed -- in all of its horror, pathos, and glory.

Jesus' promise that he will return to this earth -- and all that goes along with it -- is one big, hairy, audacious, fantastical promise. And there are many today who would say that to believe this promise is to flee from reality, to escape and to hide from our fear of death.

And we should not kid ourselves or brush aside these criticisms. For the truth that the Gospel proclaims is not some mere fact that we can verify. It is a *claim, a confession, even a wager, that there is a Reality and Truth beyond the confines of our mortal and meager existence that we will not fully experience until this world as we know it passes away.*

Faith in the promise of Advent is risky. I'd be lying to you if I said it wasn't. So then, what might compel us to take it? Why are all of you here today?

Perhaps because W.H. Auden was right. Perhaps you're here today because when you look out at the world and your own experience of it, when you look at the messiness of your own life and experience, you realize that nothing in the realm of the possible can ultimately help or save you. *You need a promise big enough and bold enough to save you.* A promise so big, so outlandish as to appear foolish.

And so each week you drag yourself out of bed and you come here to this place. You cast your lot with all the other fools and you immerse yourself in the story. You plunge yourself again and again into its grandiose claims and promises.

It's the story from Genesis that claims that God the Father of Jesus created heaven and earth in the first place, and placed humanity at the center of this world to tend and care for it and for each other.

It's the promise from Exodus that God cares deeply about how we treat one another.

It's the promise of comfort and mercy from the prophets, *even* for those who have fled from God and are running from God.

It's the promise of Mary's song that we'll hear in a few weeks, the promise that a day is coming when all who are hungry and poor and in need will be satisfied.

It's the promise from Galatians that in Christ there is no distinction between slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile, red-yellow-black-white, but that all are one in the unity of Christ.

It's the promise from Colossians that we are more than the sum of our past failures and shortcomings, that God has in fact nailed the long and ugly record that stands against us to the cross.

And it's the promise in John's *Revelation* at the end of it all that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and create a new heaven and a new earth and dwell with all of us in peace.

Is it too good to be true? Perhaps.

Or is it *so* good, *so* outlandish, *so* foolish, that it cannot help but be true?

I readily confess today that I may be a fool. (Others have long since confirmed that!) *But I need a promise big and bold enough to save me. I need a story line big enough to draw me into truth that I cannot know on my own. Nothing merely in the realm of the possible can save me. I'm dying, and so are you. And we who are dying demand a miracle.*

In a moment, the table of the Lord will be ready. When it is, this fool intends to take his place there, happily and gratefully. I invite you to join me.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.