

Gazing, Speculating, and Dreaming

Acts 1:6-14

For one brief, anxious moment this week I thought that maybe Harold Camping had it right; maybe the rapture did happen on May 21st. What happened was that I was in Knoxville shopping with Beth on Monday – MONDAY, MEMORIAL DAY, one of the busiest travel days of the year – and I decided to drive from West Hills Mall down Kingston Pike to Fresh Market... and I got there in three minutes. There was no one else on the road. It was like three-quarters of the population of Knoxville had just disappeared, and I and about 20 other people were left behind. This wasn't going to look very good; I knew that I was going to have some explaining to do back here. But then I realized that if you all were still here you were going to have some explaining to do, too.

Most of us just rolled our eyes at Mr. Camping's earnest insistence that the beginning of the end of the world was going to take place at 6:00 p.m. on May 21st. We shook our heads in wonder at the naivety and gullibility of his followers who gave away their possessions and life savings or maxed out their credit cards, so sure were they that come May 22nd; it wouldn't make any difference anyway. And then we wait for the next Harold Camping to come along in a few more years announcing that the end of the world is at hand, and we'd best get ready for it, because he was just one of a long line of people obsessed with the question, "when?" When is the end, the second coming, judgment day? Some of them 'crunch the numbers,' as Mr. Camping did, and come up with an exact date and time, others sound the alarm any time there is a strange weather pattern, or horrific earthquake or terrorist attack, call it a "sign".

It was a question that was even on the minds of the disciples: *when?* When's it going to happen? Jesus was back, right? All that remained was for God to sound the trumpet and restore the fortunes of Israel, once and for all. But Jesus' answer? *I don't know, and even if I did I wouldn't tell you. You've got bigger fish to fry. Other things to be concerned about. Other things to be doing with your time.* Then the angel had to tell them basically that same thing all over again as the disciples watched Jesus, not riding into Jerusalem in triumph, but ascending into heaven. "What are you gawking at?" the angel asked them. "Quit staring off into the wild blue yonder and speculating." The question, "when?" or for that matter, "where?" or "how?" isn't one you need concern yourself with.

And most of us don't. Frankly, if Presbyterians are guilty of anything it's not taking the promise of Jesus' return seriously enough. We've gotten on with life and church and spend very little time thinking about "when". It's not a real distraction for us.

But, a distraction is a distraction is a distraction, and if the whole issue of the second coming doesn't interest us then there are other plenty of other things out there to occupy our attention, and imagination, our time, and our energy.

Right now there are a whole lot of churches that are completely distracted by this whole business of the new amendment to the Book of Order concerning ordination standards. They can hardly see or think about anything else, whether they are giddy with glee over its passage, or certain that it heralds the demise of the Presbyterian Church.

People who spend any amount of time reading books and periodicals about the church, or for that matter just hanging around a church, the question on their minds isn't "when?" but "how much?" or "how many?" We're spending an awful lot of time wringing our hands over the numbers – whatever numbers you are looking at, they aren't what they were a few years ago. Money is scary tight. Crowds are dismayingly thin.

And then every few decades we get caught up in updating our theology and architecture and hymnals for a new day, which is all well and good, until it becomes an obsession, our focus, the thing that drives us. We struggle and we wrestle and we put our best minds to work trying to figure out the very best way, the very right answer, and we lean into the issues with all our might as if the very life of the Church depends on it, or at least our happiness with the Church.

And if we aren't paying attention, if we are too distracted, we might miss the angel when it comes along and says, "whatchu fellas gawking at?" "What are you working so hard trying to work out all by yourselves?" "What's got you so worked up you can hardly see straight??" We might even miss it when Jesus comes along and tells us that we've got a lot better things to concern ourselves with; lots bigger fish to fry than whatever has caught our attention or concern right at that moment in time.

It sounds a lot like a reprimand, especially when our pew Bibles say that Jesus "ordered" them to stay put in Jerusalem. I like to think of it as "re-directing", though, like when your preschooler becomes convinced that the goldfish is lonely and needs a friend, like the hamster. You aren't trying to correct them or punish them, just put them on a more constructive path. Jesus isn't reprimanding his disciples; he's just putting them back on course: your job isn't to figure it all out, to rely on your wits and wisdom, or even to find a safe and secure place to stand. Success or certain knowledge, or whatever it is that those distractions ultimately boil down to, that's not what is important. That's not what you need to be spending all your energy on. Your job is actually much easier than that – all he asks us to do is to go into the world and be his witnesses.

Turns out, sure and certain knowledge of something never saved anyone. People are not hungry and thirsty to know exactly when Jesus will come back, or whether God has specific rules and guidelines he follows when choosing people to be servants. Most of those things that really consume us, that we contemplate and wonder about and try so hard to work out, most of the things we pour our time and energy into, they aren't going to change anyone's life. Not once have I ever had anyone call me in the middle of the night desperate to know whether the bread and cup actually become the body and blood of Jesus at communion, or whether they are symbolic representations of it. I have never heard of anyone who has experienced a dark night of the soul because of an unbalanced budget. But people *are* desperate to know that they are loved. What *does* cause people deep spiritual anguish and darkness is guilt. Jesus sends us out into a world that is filled with real hungers, not theoretical ones. People out there are starving, body and soul, and not even the most sophisticated church website can fill the stomach of a hungry child or demonstrate that God is a God of love, not rules and unmeetable standards.

There is a practicality about being faithful disciples; a usefulness. Jesus calls his disciples together to be the Church, not simply for the sake of being a well-run organization, but to go out

into the world to make a difference, to change people's lives, to meet real needs. It is a good litmus test, actually, to see if we are being faithful disciples; every now and then we ought to stop and ask ourselves if the things that we are doing are fulfilling a deep need in anyone's life. Are the things that we are spending our time thinking about or worrying about helping anyone? Really helping anyone? Or are we distracted with things that will never change anyone's life, or comfort anyone in distress?

I would hate to guess how much of what we do as the church Jesus would consider nothing more than a distraction. I have an idea he would tell us that we have bigger fish to fry than some of the things that have captured our attention and imagination, or that have set us to worrying. But mostly he would turn our faces away from gawking at the heavens, or gazing inwardly, and show us the faces of the people out there, people who need to know what we know, the incredible mercy and compassion and love of God.