

WHY?
Sermon for Advent 1A-Mt 24-36-44
LPC, 11/27/16

This past holiday weekend I had the very great privilege to spend time with my granddaughter Ellie. Ellie is two years old and talking, though not yet fluent. She is not yet at the “why” stage, though presumably that day will come.

The “why” stage, as nearly every parent and preschool teacher knows, arrives approximately at age four. “Why” is the four-year-old’s favorite word. “Why is the sky blue?” “Why do I have ten fingers?” “Why are there girls and boys?”

Child development experts tell us that while adults assume a “why” question represents a desire for knowledge, this in fact is not usually the case with four-year-olds. When a four-year-old asks “why”, he or she is not really seeking a reason for something.

Four-year-olds have ingeniously figured out that asking an adult “why” is a terrific way to engage an adult in conversation. Few adults can resist the temptation to demonstrate their superior knowledge to someone, even if that someone is only four.

A four-year-old of only average cleverness will have figured out that asking “why” attracts a nicer form of adult attention than throwing a tantrum. When you think about it, the “why” strategy is positively brilliant: an excellent way of gaining a social foothold in a system clearly dominated by adults.

You might say that “why” is the quintessential human question at all ages of life. It perfectly expresses our native inquisitiveness. At some point, it also comes to represent the classic problem of being a self-conscious creature in a world full of woe. At some point, nearly every asks, “Why” – “Why, God?” “Why me?” “Why my loved one?” “You healed other people, why *not* me (or my loved one)?”

In the past several weeks I’ve encountered a particularly painful “why” question. A person is old, or in pain, or suffering personality loss due to stroke or Alzheimer’s. “Why?” their friends and relatives ask, “Why is God keeping her alive?” “He’s ready to go, God. Why don’t you take him?” “How can it possibly serve God’s purpose for this person to suffer indefinitely with a disease that’s terminal anyway?”

I’ll return to the subject of hard “why” questions like this, though I can’t promise to offer an answer that will satisfy you any more than the typical adult’s answer satisfies a four-year-old.

This is the first Sunday of Advent, which is the season which precedes Christmas. Christmas of course commemorates the coming to earth of God in human form as Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem of Judea approximately 2,016 years ago. During the Advent season, we Christians are supposed to prepare ourselves spiritually for that stupendous event.

While looking back to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in ancient times, Advent also looks forward to the point beyond time when Jesus Christ the Son of God will come again in glory to bring to fulfillment God’s great Creation Experiment.

As I’ve said before, the branch of theology that deals with this kind of thing – the consummation of history – is called “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic is a theme in many religions. Apocalyptic literature is concerned with visions of the end of time. This is, frankly, some of the strangest stuff that’s ever been written.

During Advent, our Christian readings come from the apocalyptic sections of the Bible. Some of these writings come from the Hebrew prophets, some come from the pen of St. Paul the Apostle, and some of them come from the mouth of Jesus himself, as recorded by the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

We have examples of each in today's readings: one from the prophet Isaiah, one from the letters of Paul, and one from the mouth of Jesus himself, as related by the evangelist Matthew.

This passage from Matthew is a favorite among Christians who preach about the "Rapture," an event to come when the saved of earth will be caught up in the clouds by the Lord, while the unsaved are left behind. As you may recall, there was a series of novels on this theme a few years back.

Personally, I'm not big on "Rapture" language. "Rapture" ideology became popular in the 1800's. Although it has some biblical basis, to build an entire theology around it places an undue emphasis and a slanted interpretation on short biblical passages which have been divorced from their literary and cultural contexts.

That being said, we are left with scripture like this which speaks of two fieldworkers, one of whom is taken and the other left, or two women grinding grain, one of whom is taken and the other left. It bothers me that a loving, beneficent, omnipotent God may be so arbitrary as to save some people and leave others to languish.

Here is where I resort to one of favored touchstones of biblical interpretation, which is that when the Bible seems especially troublesome it may be that we are assuming that the Bible describes the way things actually were historically, or the way that they ought to be, when in fact in many of these places at least, the Bible describes how things *are*, and especially how they are experienced by the finite people of God when they genuinely encounter the infinite, something way beyond their ability to comprehend.

What Jesus describes here in Matthew is what the human encounter with God is like: one is taken and the other is left. This is baffling, unsettling, and ultimately unanswerable. One person has extraordinary pain, another received blessing upon blessing. Who can say why?

There is nothing in this passage from Matthew, nor in the other biblical passages that are supposed to support "Rapture" theology to indicate either that God is here saving the righteous and damning the wicked, or that God is randomly saving some people and not others regardless of their level of righteousness.

The Rapture is a way that human beings supply an answer to the question "Why?" "Why me and not another? Why this person and not that one?" Their answer is not necessarily God's answer. In fact this text from Matthew seems to say that there is no answer to "Why" that human beings can make sense of.

Does this mean that we should stop asking "Why?" By no means. When we adults ask God, "why?" we are like four-year-olds asking adults, "why?" And we are no more wrong to ask than they are. Remember that the four-year-old's question is not, fundamentally, a desire for knowledge, but rather a desire for contact and interaction, which is, generally speaking, readily given. The same is true for us adults, whether we realize it or not. We ask God "why?" because we desire contact and interaction. And we shall get it. But we must, as the Scripture says, be ready for it.