

We Can't Deny What We Know

This Wednesday, September 18th, Jesus is coming, and the Rapture will occur. I know this because an anonymous, handwritten sign to that effect recently appeared outside the Outback Steakhouse off Ritchie Highway. One of our neighbors thoughtfully took a picture and posted it on Nextdoor. The string of comments that followed contained all the predictable responses. There were jokes about blooming onions and the “Last Outback Supper.” Some people facetiously lamented that they’d miss birthdays or rejoiced to skip dental checkups. And, of course, there were threats of hellfire and eternal damnation leveled at anyone who dared to get too flippant. Sometimes, I wonder how the joyous news of the Gospel morphed into the bullying that pollutes so much of Christianity these days. “Just you wait, you miserable sinner, Jesus is coming and then you’ll get what’s coming to you!” *Yuck.*

I also wonder how we all got so cynical about Jesus’s return. I’m as guilty as anyone of laughing at the Outback Steakhouse poster. Its message might be divinely inspired, but it’s more likely the ramblings of someone who isn’t entirely well. We’ve been trying to foretell Jesus’s return from the moment he ascended into heaven, and no one has succeeded so far. Remember the Mayan Calendar? The “Left Behind” series? Y2K? All of them predicted the end of the world and yet, here we still are. Jesus told us that even he doesn’t know the day and hour of his return. Only the Father knows, and he seems determined to surprise us all. So, much as I’d love to believe Jesus will be back in time for me to see with my mortal eyes his glorious return surrounded by the Heavenly host, history and Scripture have taught me not to hold my breath.

That Outback Steakhouse sign got me thinking, though. We can enjoy a good giggle when presented with a prediction like that, but Episcopalians stand up, week after week, and affirm our faith in the Nicene Creed, including our belief that Jesus “will come again in glory to

judge the living and the dead.” If we believe that – and we shouldn’t be saying it if we don’t – then we need to think about how we’re going to explain the state of our Father’s world whenever Jesus finally appears.

Our reading from the Book of Proverbs tells us how the Father’s Spirit of Wisdom feels about people who choose to ignore her counsel. “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?” she demands. “How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” These are fair questions. I’m not sure which Wisdom thinks is worse, deliberate ignorance or the pseudo-sophisticated skepticism that tries to undercut large truths by carping at tiny details. Jesus, too, gets impatient with those who refuse to accept what he wants them to know. In our Gospel reading, Jesus rebukes Peter as “Satan” when Peter tries to stop Jesus from teaching the disciples about his Passion. It’s harsh, even allowing for Bible scholars’ insistence that, in Jesus’s culture, Satan was thought to be a prosecutor of foolish mortals, not the Adversary as we understand the creature today. Jesus’s perception of Satan may or may not have been closer to ours but, either way, Jesus clearly wanted to impress upon Peter that he was never to prevent Jesus from telling him and the other disciples whatever they needed to know.

Reading these passages in the Season of Creation, there are obvious parallels between Peter’s willful ignorance of Jesus’s impending Passion and our own willful ignorance when it comes to the state of our world. Recent reports from the scientific community about global warming, depletion of natural resources and accelerating extinctions are alarming, but they’re nothing new. The industrial world has known for a long time that we were doing serious damage to the Earth. Let me give you just one example. Dr. Rachel Carson’s landmark book, *Silent Spring*, put the world on notice about the devastating effects of indiscriminate use of pesticides in 1962. Dr. Carson’s warnings were moderately phrased and supported by volumes of solid

scientific research. Chemical companies fought back nonetheless, ridiculing Dr. Carson as a radical, a Communist and – my personal favorite – a “hysterical woman.” Thanks in part to corporate manipulation of public opinion, DDT wasn’t banned in the United States until 1972, a full decade after *Silent Spring* was published and eight years after Dr. Carson died of cancer. Since then, corporations have found many new ways to poison the Earth, and public opinion around environmental degradation remains highly politicized. We can quibble about the dangers presented by various pollutants, we can celebrate the limited progress that has been made in some places, we can look for substitutes when rising temperatures and changes in weather patterns threaten our favorite consumables like coffee, wine and chocolate, but we can’t honestly claim we don’t know there’s a problem. We’ve known there was a problem for over sixty years.

It’s a particular frustration for me as a preacher who cares about Creation that Jesus never specifically told his followers to take care of his Father’s world. He didn’t have to, because the Hebrew Scriptures ring with reverence for Creation and the Law of Moses is filled with instructions on how to tend the natural world. Jesus’s contemporaries lived by that law, as did much of humanity throughout most of recorded history. The wholesale pillaging of the Earth in the name of short-term profit didn’t really take hold until the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Jesus probably knew what we moderns would do to his Father’s masterpiece, but his mission to save humankind from sin and death left him little time to warn post-industrial civilization about the consequences of our disregard for the health of our world.

This can all sound pretty scary. Still, I’m mindful of James the Just’s admonitions to those who seek to teach God’s word. Everything James said about the dangers of careless speech goes double for anyone who dares to step into a pulpit, so don’t let me discourage you. The theme of this year’s Season of Creation is “to hope and act with Creation.” Thanks be to God;

hope is still with us. Environmental scientists tell us that the planet is changing faster than expected due to climate change, and they're not sure if the changes can be turned around. As people of faith, we know that all things are possible with God, and we can draw hope from our belief that the Holy Spirit is guiding us. We may not be able to remake Eden, but there's a lot we can do to slow environmental degradation and clean up humanity's mess. It starts with education. The Internet offers a wealth of information about how to live in greater harmony with the Earth. We owe it to ourselves and our Creator to learn how to make better choices. Connect with a few environmental action groups and read what they send you. Sign their petitions, send their messages to your legislators, and let them teach you what you can do for the Earth. Share what you learn with your family and friends; speaking for St. Luke's, we'd love to hear your ideas. When you travel, eat out, or buy things, encourage the businesses you patronize to be better environmental stewards. Change can come hard, but it's not impossible. Even the mighty Amazon – the retailer, not the river – was persuaded to rethink its packaging and shipping practices once enough of its customers signed enough petitions to get its attention.

Our Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. Our culture is so completely organized around comfort and convenience that it's virtually impossible for any of us not to contribute to environmental damage. But our faith tells us that God forgives us when we confess our sins and return to him. There's still time to change our ways and work toward healing our beautiful, damaged planet. If Jesus sees us sincerely trying to make amends, he'll forgive our past mistakes when the Judgment Day arrives. But we'd best get started, because time is running short. Wednesday is only three days from now and, while the Outback Steakhouse prophet is probably mistaken about Jesus's arrival date, you never know. This time, he might just have it right. Amen.