

Advent and the Future

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44

Delivered on December 1, 2019

Well, this morning I want to start by saying I hope everyone had a nice Thanksgiving last Thursday. I think I am still stuffed even though it is now Sunday. You probably are too, and that seems to be the idea of Thanksgiving that we all get as stuffed as possible. Now I don't know what Thanksgiving at your home is like, but I'm wondering, have you ever been to one of those Thanksgiving dinners where they have so much food to choose from you couldn't possibly fit it all on one plate. You couldn't even fit it all on two plates. Not only do they have turkey, and stuffing and gravy and cranberry sauce, not only do they have all the traditional stuff, but they also have ham, and they have squash casserole, they have mashed potatoes, they have macaroni and cheese, they have potato salad, they have rice, they have steamed cabbage, they have steamed carrots, they have corn, they have coleslaw, they have green beans, they have green bean casserole, they have bread, they have pumpkin pie, they have sweet potato pie, they have sweet potato soufflé, they have apple pie, I could go on and on, but this service today is only an hour. The point is, you couldn't have had everything, you had to pick and choose.

That is often how I feel about our faith. It is like one of those enormous Thanksgiving buffets. Some people say with great confidence and bravado that they believe every word of the bible. God said it, I believe it, that settles it. You've heard that before. Now, I don't ever want to belittle someone's faith, but the problem with that is that most people who say that don't even know half of what's in the bible. The bible is a huge book. I've been reading and studying the bible since I was about seventeen. I have read it from cover to cover more than once. But on my best days I can't remember more than about a third of it. So, I'm not real

impressed by someone who says they believe something when they don't even know what's in it. First know what's in it and then tell me whether you believe it.

And I suppose it is because we couldn't have everything that when I was growing up, in the Holmes family we did our own picking and choosing from that enormous buffet. So what were our particular choices? Well, I remember we were big on the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), we were big on going to church and praying, we were big on the Ten Commandments especially that part about taking the Lord's name in vain. We weren't even allowed to say gosh in our house because apparently it sounded too much like God. Seriously! But because you can't have everything one thing we never did when I was growing up is talk about all the texts we read this time of year about the day of the Lord's return. We never talked about when Jesus would come back, what it would be like, what exactly Jesus said about when he was coming back. Just like picking at that Thanksgiving buffet, we had to pick and choose what was important and what wasn't, and we didn't talk about that.

But then something happened to me. Sometime when I got older I met people for whom the day of the Lord's return was indeed what they talked about and prayed about and thought about, and in fact that was about all they talked about and prayed about and thought about. I would listen to them talk and occasionally I would shake my head and under my breath I would mutter why don't you talk about something more important. But on the other hand, I am sure they would say the same thing when all they heard me talk about was the golden rule and the Ten Commandments and all my choices from the faith buffet. Why don't you talk about something more important, Rich? Why do you choose that stuff?

Well, I don't know. I frankly don't know why these were the particular elements of faith in the Holmes family when I was growing up, any more than I always know why I chose the steamed cabbage and the mashed potatoes instead of the rice and the green bean casserole. But if I had to guess I suppose it would do to consider what all these biblical prophecies about Jesus' return and the end times are all about. When Jesus talks about all this he says those who mourn will be comforted and those who are hungry will be filled. While on the other hand, those who are filled will be hungry and those who laugh will mourn. The prophets say every valley shall be lifted up, and the mountains and hills shall be made low. What all these passages seem to be about in other words is an end of this present order, and the beginning of a new order. What is promised is a reversal of the present order where everything that's white is black and everything that's black is white, and where what is up is down and what is down will be up. And here's what I think. You see, if you tend to think the present order is just fine thank you very much, you probably don't pay too much attention to all that stuff. And I guess that's really who we were in the Holmes family. We thought the present order was just fine. We always had a pretty nice upper middle class, I might even say even upper class existence. Now, we didn't live in Beverly Hills with a butler and a gardener and a limo driver. Nor were our lives problem free. No one's life is free of problems. In our family as in all families we had death, we had disease. We had friends and relatives with drug addictions, alcohol addictions. And we had our moments. We had our moments of doubt and despair, yes even depression. But we did not wake up on a daily basis thinking that life was hopeless, or that our lives were fundamentally unfair. We never once went without something to eat. We never once spent a day in school in which we thought our school was unsafe. We never once spent a day at home when we

thought our neighborhood was unsafe. We never, ever, and I mean never ever had someone look at us with an expression on their face that told us they thought we were dirty or we were trash. And by the way, I think we all know that look. I am ashamed to say that there were times in my life when I even gave that look, but I never received it.

And I have noticed that the people who can't stop talking about the day of the Lord's return, and I mean who really can't stop talking about it, well what I find is that these tend to be people for whom this world doesn't quite hold so much promise. They tend to be those for whom the injustice of this life is not just something they think about every now and then, when someone in their family loses a job or when tragedy strikes, but it's something they live with every day. They are reminded of it each day in where they live, where they send their kids to school, how people look at them and in a hundred other different ways. They are the ones who look for the day of the Lord to come like a thief in the night, catching the rich and the powerful off guard. They are the ones who don't care if it's been two thousand years since Jesus walked the earth or two days, they expect him to come back any day now, and they are the ones whom you can almost hear cheer and celebrate at the reading of these Advent texts each year with all the kind of excitement you would expect to find at the Super Bowl each year.

Now what's the point of reflecting on all this? Well, it is not to say that we can trade places with those who see the world this way. And frankly, I would not want to. Who among us would want to trade places with those who live lives without all our advantages. But if you ever have trouble understanding what Jesus' return to this earth is all about, maybe it would help to begin with people whose lives are most like Jesus. And I don't mean that their lives are like them in the sense that they act like Jesus. I don't mean their lives are like Jesus in the sense that they

are as loving as he is, or as patient as he is, or that they are any less sinful than any of us. They may not. But their lives are like him in the sense that the circumstances of their lives are like his. They are the ones who are despised. They are the ones who are condemned. They are the ones whose lives are about daily suffering.

There was once a traveling salesman who used to go door to door selling insurance, and as you probably know all traveling salespeople have certain territories that they work, and this particular salesman had his territory in the middle of the country stretching from about Columbia, Missouri to Topeka, Kansas along interstate 70. And as he was going from door to door in this scenic heartland of America, this salesman would drive past miles and miles of farmland along 1-70 and one time as he was driving this way, he couldn't help but notice that on one of these farms he saw a big red barn, and on the side of that barn there were all these bullseye's that were drawn, and for every bullseye, he saw an arrow that was right there in the middle of the bullseye. Well, that, in itself was not so remarkable, anyone of course can hit bullseyes if they shoot enough arrows. This salesman had personally never shot a bow and arrow in his life but he figured if he shot a thousand arrows he could probably hit at least ten bullseyes. But what was remarkable was that there didn't appear to be any arrows that missed. Every arrow that was stuck in the side of the barn was stuck right smack dab in the middle of a bullseye. And what was even more remarkable is that there out in the field where the barn stood, the salesman saw a young boy who couldn't have been more than 11 or 12 who was standing there with a bow and a quiver of arrows, and the salesman said to himself you know what, I've got to stop and talk to this young boy, this young archer and find out what makes him such a great shot. And so he did. He got off the interstate and drove down the long dusty

driveway of the farm to where this boy was standing and he said "Excuse me, young man, young man, how old are you."

"I'm twelve".

"Well, if you're only twelve, tell me, if you don't mind, can you tell me how is it you're able to hit a bullseye every time you shoot off an arrow."

"Oh, well, sir, you see, that's easy, there's nothing to it" the boy said

"There's nothing to it? The salesman said. You're only twelve years old. How can there be nothing to it?"

And he picked up a can of paint and a brush and he said "You see, here, every time my arrow goes into the side of the barn, I just paint a bullseye around it. I paint a bullseye around it.

I think there's a valuable lesson in this story. Sometimes we can take our own view of the world, we can take our own experience of where we land in this world and make that experience the way things are. We can draw a bullseye around it and make that experience the center of the universe. But if you grew up like me and you never thought the day of Christ's return was all that important, try talking to people who experience life very differently from the way you and I experience it. Try talking to people who experienced life the way Jesus experienced it. And then maybe you'll understand.