**Raptured No More**

December 3, 2023 Advent I

Isaiah 64: 1-9 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Mark 13: 24-37

There is a lot going on in the world lately that is distressing. War between Ukraine and Russia. The war in Israel-Palestine, which the UN says is leading to Palestinian genocide. Attacks on the rights of 2SLGBTQ folk, especially transgender and non-binary persons. Increasing houselessness and opioid toxic poisonings. Climate disasters and changes that are affecting millions of lives and a fossil fuel industry buckling down to convince us they can keep producing in a renewable way. It is all quite overwhelming. So much so that some may want to cry to God like Isaiah, “tear open the heavens and come down” and stop this madness. However, we know this as a lament and not really a reality. Others, especially many evangelical conservatives and fundamentalist Christians are supportive of events like the war in the Middle East and support Israel, only because they see it as connected to the end times, Jews having a role in the so-called ‘last days’ and Jesus’ second coming. They celebrate these events as steps toward the so-called rapture, where Jesus comes again and takes all the chosen up to heaven leaving the rest to suffer in the mess created. So, they take steps to encourage it along, believing they are among the chosen. The problem with this kind of thinking is that it creates a detachment from caring for the earth and the people impacted by the wars, discrimination, and devastation of the planet. Brian McLaren outlines this thinking in his book Do I Stay Christian? He writes, after outlining the potentially devastating effects of a nuclear war and how millions of Christians are being taught to expect it and even pray for it and hope to accelerate it:

Then add one more factor: imagine if significant numbers of people have been guaranteed by their hyper-confident religious leaders that they will be exempt from this grim, hopeless future, being guaranteed safe passage to heaven through a divine skyhook called “the rapture”. The absurdity of this scenario surly rivals even the conspiratorial craziness of Q-Anon and the like, but it has been swallowed hook, line, and sinker by millions of my fellow Christians, including many in high places of power in the U.S. government. This doomsday scenario leaves behind all non-Christians to suffer the fate they deserve and is part and parcel of “historic orthodox Christianity” as understood by shockingly high numbers of sincere but misguided Christians.

He adds in a footnote at the end of this “It is not, I come from a denomination that created rapture theology in the 1830s”. It is not orthodox. It is not biblical.

Today we begin the season of Advent. The season of waiting, watching, and preparing for the coming of Jesus, the coming of Christ. It is a preparing for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, and the scripture readings also often bring us to readings that seem to point to Jesus coming again. As we read the gospel for today there is a message that many have understood to believe Jesus is describing his coming again. However, many modern biblical scholars believe that Jesus is referring to his passion and resurrection, not his second coming. He is looking forward to the moment that his life brings in the coming of God’s reign of love and peace. It has everything to do with the significance of his first coming, they say, not a second coming. He is encouraging his followers to keep focused on peace and not violence, knowing that some want to violently overthrow the Romans. Indeed, there was an uprising between 66-70 AD that ended in the destruction of the Temple as Jesus predicted. He also emphasizes that when these things will happen no one knows, only God.

In today’s scripture, Jesus is cautioning us about claiming esoteric knowledge about the end times. He may be chastening the Left Behind, Rapture, and Thief in the Night crowd to calm down and get to work in healing the earth. Beware end-time preachers who know when the divine call comes. Jesus does not want us to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. We need to be in this moment and in this earth, and not looking so far ahead that we fail to see God moving in this very moment of time. Where do we see Christ coming in our lives day to day? Where is God in our midst? Where do we experience love breaking through,especially in the midst of all the distressing news? This is the calling of Advent, the message of watching and being awake and prepared.

The passage also makes reference to a man going on a journey and leaving those of the household in charge, and to keep watch. As I go on sabbatical this week, I leave you all to carry on this ministry. I am confident with our strong leadership who will carry on the ministry and some of our programs. I am grateful for all those who have agreed to help out in my absence. As I prepare to leave, I wish to share with you, if you may not have heard, my plans for the next three months.

First off, we will be celebrating Christmas with our families, which has not happened very often over the years, with both our families being out of town. So, Thursday we fly to Ontario where Brian’s family Christmas gathering is happening on Saturday. They often have it a few weeks before Christmas as they all go off in different directions Christmas day. We will be back after that before heading to Calgary Dec 23 to spend Christmas with my family.

In January I have two meetings with Regional Council staff in Saskatoon, to discuss my retirement ideas, learn the process and what is possible and do some discerning. For the rest of the time I have two areas of focus, working with the unhoused and moving forward discussions with the cluster on how we be the United Church in Regina, exploring the possibilities and need to share resources and ministry together.

With the unhoused, I will be spending some time establishing the Warm Welcome warming centre at Carmichael Outreach. We have heard that the province is seriously considering how to fund this and they are talking with the city about a funding model. This is very good news! I will also be spending time with other agencies, volunteering with them to experience their work and the issues. I am in touch with houseless advocates who do regular outreach at night and hope to go out with them a few times as well.

Plans are underway for a Cluster Event in January for Regina and area churches to hear from other places that are living out ways of sharing ministry resources together. I will continue to be part of conversations with the congregations in Regina who are exploring sharing ministry personnel and committees.

And if this sounds a lot like work, I thought so too, when I was thinking about it so I am also planning to take Mondays and Fridays off, so I have three months of long weekends to be open to possibilities and where the Spirit may lead.

As you move into this Advent time, may you be open to experiencing Christ in unexpected ways. May you be present to the needs of the community and the world around you, and not get caught up in future thinking. May you be blessed with beautiful time with family and friends and be touched by the wonder and mystery of the season. Happy Advent and Merry Christmas!