

**Problem: What if we are the ones that are going to be left behind?**

-Every Spring Break during college I always enjoyed going on a service trip somewhere. I mostly went on Habitat for Humanity trips where we would go and build houses all across the country. It was really amazing as it would just be usually a group of 12 or so students, renting a St. Olaf College van, and traveling ourselves to a certain part of country. I went and built houses in Florida, New Mexico, and South Carolina as part of these trips and formed really deep friendships with other students. However, being that it was just a group of college students traveling together, things didn't always go smoothly. On one trip I remember stopping for gas at a truck stop in the middle of nowhere. One person filled up the van while the rest of us went and used the restrooms. After what seemed an appropriate amount of time, a group of us came back to the van, jumped in, and continued on our way. I remember we were listening to 80's rock music and really getting into it after this stop. About 30 minutes after our stop while we were tooling down the highway, one person suddenly asked over the music: "Where's Katie?" It was like a group full of the 3 stooges all looking at each other and wondering the same thing: "Where's Katie?". Turns out, Katie got talking with the cashier at the truck stop without anyone noticing got left behind. She left her cellphone in the van, so no one could get a hold of her. We ended turning around as soon as we could and drove the 30 minutes back to pick her up. After pulling into the truck stop, we found her calmly sitting on the curb. "I knew you guys would figure out that I was not there sooner or later," I remember her saying to us.

-I find I am putting myself into Katie's shoes being left behind at the truck stop when I read this gospel text for today. This text, full of apocalyptic language, speaks heavily about the second coming of Christ and says perhaps most famously: "Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

-This isn't very comforting. What if I am Nicholas Cage and am doing my thing like in the *Left Behind* movie and now have to come to wraps with the fact that God has left me behind at the truck stop? What if that were to happen?

**Solution: Jesus' message is about active watching and preparing to be left behind in order to prepare for the "great gathering".**

-Being left behind is a fear I believe most of us have. I think it comes from a fear of being alone or being without our loved ones or support of family/friends. The concept of Hell that Martin Luther was so afraid of, as our adult education group has studied, was not burning in eternal fire, damnation, and little devils with pitchforks prodding us. Hell for Luther was being "completely isolated from God." Completely alone. Left behind.

-I know there are many people in this country, especially immigrant families, who are feeling, especially after this election, a real sense of being alone. I heard from my friend

who is an elementary teacher in Minnesota that after the election she had 5 first graders who were immigrants coming to her crying and asking if she now had to report their Mommy and Daddy to the President of the United States and send them both out of the country. "What will I do without my Mommy and Daddy?" one of them asked.

-If you ask me, we don't need this type of theology anymore. It doesn't really serve us very well, especially right now. So what is another way we can approach these sometimes very difficult scripture texts.

-Well for me personally, one thing I think is important to do is go back to the Greek language. Not that this is the "be all" and "end all" answer to interpretation, but because knowing how these words fit into a different culture from our own can influence how they influence us in our own culture.

-The first word that is interesting to me is the word *parousia*. Parousia, or what is commonly translated as the "second coming of Christ". Jesus is talking directly about parousia here in this Matthew passage and insists in verse 36 that "no one knows" when this will happen. This word is commonly used in other Greek literature to refer to "an arrival of the host". The party can't start until the host arrives! If you break the greek word down literally, it means: ""being beside". The host has come to "be beside" the guests. It's a word that emphasizes much more of a hopeful "gathering" verses "plucking up and leaving behind" which is maybe what you and I are more used to thinking. Jesus seems to agree with this understanding of parousia as he says in 5 verses prior to our passage today: "They will see the Human One coming in the heavenly clouds with power and great splendor. He will send his angels with the sound of a great trumpet, and they will gather up those from the four corners of the earth." (verse 31)

-So if the parousia is more about "the gathering of all things", then what is Jesus talking about where "one will be taken and one will be left." Well, there is this very interesting book by Mark Davis, a presbyterian pastor, called *Left Behind and Loving It* where he digs more into this question.

-The two greek words that he digs into are *paralambano* (to take) and *aphemi* (to leave behind). Davis points out that these words could be translated the way we have them here, but that there are other translations (as it typical for the Greek language) too. Another possible way to translate these words which would also be honoring the context of the text would be *paralambano* as to "take as prisoner" and *aphemi* as to "forgive." So, we would read verses 40 and 41 like this: "Then two will be in the field; one will be taken as a prisoner and one will be forgiven Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken as prisoner and one will be forgiven." I think this really interesting because what this different translation does is turn the whole *Left Behind* theology on it's head. Davis in his book even uses Noah as an example when he notes: "who are the ones who are actually "taken" in this story and who are left behind? The ones who

were taken were not the “good ones” but the ones who weren’t watching. Noah and the ones who stayed were the ones who did the work continuing God’s creation.

-What if the good news is not that we will be “plucked away”, but that we are radically loved and forgiven to be left here on earth to continue the work of the parousia, the great gathering.

**Implication: A time of division/warning can shake us out of our complacency and energize us to actively watch.**

-What if our calling is to be left behind at the truck stop? What if we are the ones that now need to actively watch and be a part of the parousia? What does watching mean?

-Here is where I digress from my example of Katie waiting on the curb at the truckstop. Because, this example shows us how we are used to waiting. Waiting in this culture seems to be tied in with boredom and silence. But this is not the waiting that Jesus has in mind for us who are “left behind.”

-It’s interesting in Jesus’ example of the Noah story again, he doesn’t mention sin at all here. “For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. (verses 37-39a) The problem here wasn’t that the people around Noah were evil, wicked, sinful people. The problem is that they were complacent. The people around Noah were going about “business as usual” and going about their lives like God didn’t matter. Noah, on the other hand, was actively watching and was listening to God, heeding a warning compared to the rest of the world that was doing whatever.

-My friends, it is the beginning of a new church year and a new Advent season and is a perfect time for us to do some soul searching on what it means to actively wait and not be complacent. It is a time for us not to be lulled into “life being normal”, and we can see it already from everything to the economy, education, drug/alcohol abuse, environment, and human rights. If we are the ones who God has charged with work of the great parousia, helping to bring about the great gathering, then we have to be the ones to do it.

-In my own life for whatever it is worth, I am finding in myself a renewed sense of being an engaged American, a citizen of this country. A citizen who does not stand for blasphemy, hate, or isolation. As the years go on, I hope to encourage this congregation to walk with me in being engaged citizens too. Maybe you have always wanted to volunteer at the Poverello or Soft Landing Missoula, or any other worthwhile organizations we have in Missoula. Now is the time to actively wait. Maybe you have always thought that I need to rethink my stewardship and giving of resources, but have never gotten around to it. Now is the time to actively wait. Our world needs more people who are actively waiting. Our world needs more people left behind. May God bless us

who are left behind in our work of preparing for God's great and hopeful gathering.  
Amen.