

When the Clouds Parted

Earlier this fall while rummaging through the internet, I came across a copy of a sermon that had been preached several years ago at a memorial service for a man who had been one of my teachers at divinity school. He had been one of the more significant influences on me during my time there, and I was very interested in what a colleague of his had to say about his life. Unfortunately, the sermon was in German, since he was German, and although he had spent most of his teaching career here in the US, he had returned to Germany and spent the last fifteen or so years of his life teaching there. While I can somewhat make my way through, say, a newspaper in German, I couldn't make any headway at all with this sermon. Thankfully, Hardy von Auenmueller came to the rescue and translated enough of it to give me the gist of what was said.

I had little or no news of this professor after his return to Germany, and running across this sermon inspired me to do some further research on the internet into what he been doing during those years. In doing so, I ran across a book of his that had been published posthumously, a collection of lectures and essays written over the course of his career, a book I had never seen or even heard about before. I thought it might be interesting to read, so I ordered a copy and it came just a day or two before I left for Ghost Ranch. So I took it with and was able to read most of it during my week out there in New Mexico, not surprisingly since I can get more read in one week there, than I can in two or three months here at home.

Interestingly enough, among the chapters in the book was the baccalaureate address he had given at the divinity school the year I graduated, an address which I had not attended (another story), but which contained an indirect but unmistakable reference to me, a pleasant surprise. I really enjoyed the book, in large part because all the lectures and essays included sounded just exactly like him, just like his lectures at school, and though you might think, "Well, duh, he did write them," there was actually a very good reason why they *shouldn't* have sounded exactly like his lectures. You see, he had a very quirky lecture style, so quirky that I had always just assumed that if he ever published anything he'd clean that up into something a little more straightforward. But he hadn't, not at all, with the result that a number of these essays were just as incoherent as many (actually most) of his lectures had been.

I don't mean that as a criticism, though, at least not altogether, though it was the cause of a great deal of frustration on the part of his students. The lectures were often incoherent, but never pointless, and if you could stay engaged, you'd always learn something. You see, his lectures were, or at least gave the impression of being, completely spontaneous events. He never referred to any notes, not even the vaguest of outlines. In fact, I doubt there was an outline, even in his own mind, and it always seemed as if he were groping his way toward some conclusion he was sure was there without knowing exactly how to get there. As a result, his lectures tended to wander all over the place as he tried various paths, and very often never got anywhere, never

reached any kind of conclusion, leaving all of us scratching our heads and wondering, “What was that all about?” Most of the time.

But every once in a while, he’d get there, and it was like he’d stumbled out of the darkness into the light, and when that happened, when it all fell into place, it was like experiencing a revelation. It *was* a revelation, and you’d see things in a light you’d never seen them before, and suddenly it all made sense. It was a truly amazing experience when that happened. Trouble is that only happened two or three times a semester, and the rest of the time you had to sit through one seemingly incoherent lecture after another, trying your best to stay alert, even simply to stay awake, all in the hope that maybe, just maybe, it might be one of those days, one of those revelations.

I thought at the time it was a pretty bizarre way to try to teach anyone anything, but the older I get, and the more I reflect back on that experience, the more sense it makes to me, the more it actually resembles the way we really do learn things. When I think about my own experience in ministry, there have been periods of time, sometimes quite long periods of time, when I struggled to make sense of things, when it felt like I was just muddling along in a world without any clear sense of direction or purpose. But then every once in a while, not nearly as often as I would have liked, there would be these moments of clarity, as if the clouds had parted and the light come streaming in, and everything seemed to fall into place and it all made perfect sense, and I really and truly felt like I was part of something much bigger than myself. While early on I always wished those moments would have come more often, as I have grown older I’m just glad they’ve come at all, however infrequently.

I think there’s something very much like that going on in our gospel lesson for this morning, for this 1st Sunday of Advent. It’s a strange passage, so strange that there’s nothing like it anywhere else in the gospel, and there’s a chapter like this in all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke as well as Mark, though not in the Gospel of John. These “strange” chapters are, I suspect, among the oldest parts of the gospels, and here, again I suspect, we have a glimpse into the heart of Christianity in its earliest days, the years immediately following Christ’s death and resurrection. Here you can see how strong had been the hope for Christ’s imminent return in those early days, an almost fever pitch of expectation among the early Christians, something they expected to happen literally any day. Partly because Jesus had said he would return, but also because in their eyes there was still so much unfinished business, business that surely Jesus would return soon and take care of.

But then nothing happened, at least not what they had expected and invested their hopes in, and as with any fervent hope that’s disappointed, there was the inevitable disillusionment, and you can sense a concern here in this passage about the growing doubts among the faithful with its repeated exhortations about the need to stay alert, to keep awake, not to give up, to keep the faith that the days were surely coming when the clouds would part, and the Son of Man return in all his glory, to establish his kingdom of justice and righteousness. But still, it didn’t happen, not like they’d expected.

To this day, it hasn’t happened, not in the way that those early Christians imagined it would. But while it may not have happened in the way they expected, for those who did not give up

hope, for those who stayed alert and kept awake, for those whose faith remained strong, for them the clouds did part, and the light appeared, and they came to understand that in fact Jesus was in their midst, was present among them, was with them every time they sat down together at table, and that his Spirit was at that very moment working among them, continuing to do the work of the church for the building up of the kingdom of God. It may not have happened in the way they'd expected, but it *was* happening, was happening right there in their midst.

That's really not all that different from our own experience today, or that of Christians throughout history. We all have our hopes and dreams for the kingdom of God, as well as our expectations of what that will be like, and when it will come to be. When it doesn't seem to happen like we'd hoped and even expected, when it doesn't happen in the way we were so sure at times that it was going to happen, then it's very easy to become disillusioned and slowly but surely give up on that hope, and stop even looking for that day to come, at least looking in any serious way. And may not even notice then, when the clouds do part, and the light comes streaming in, and we can see the Spirit at work right here in our very midst. Can see, that is, if we've stayed alert and kept awake, still watching for that day to come.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*