

## To Welcome the Children, Heal the Planet

If you were in church or on Zoom with us last week, you know that an unsigned poster recently showed up at Outback Steakhouse predicting that, on September 18<sup>th</sup>, Jesus would appear and the Rapture would occur. Today is September 22<sup>nd</sup>, and here we still are. There are several ways to think about that. We can decide that the Outback Steakhouse Prophet, like so many others, was simply wrong about the date, and chuckle at the presumption of anyone who dares to predict what only the Father knows. If we want to be kind, we can understand the poster as an expression of the writer's fear that the world is becoming so unbearable that we need Jesus to ride to the rescue *right now*. We can admit to being a little nervous that this failed prediction, like those that have gone before, may mean that Jesus has washed his hands of humanity and isn't coming back at all. My own theory is more hopeful. I don't think our Lord has given up on us. I believe that Peter was correct when he wrote in his second letter that Jesus is patiently waiting for all of us to come to repentance so that no one has to perish when he comes to put things right. So, when a prediction of the Second Coming doesn't pan out, perhaps we should see it not as a failed prophesy, but as another reminder to get our collective act together.

Today's readings from Scripture give us lots of advice on how to do that. Let's begin with our passage from Proverbs, known in some circles as the "Hymn to Saint Martha Stewart." This passage isn't popular among feminists, given how religious authorities have abused it over the centuries to browbeat women who didn't want to spend their lives meekly walking ten paces behind their fathers, husbands, and sons. A close reading of this proverb doesn't support male supremacism, because this woman is no submissive handmaid. She's strong, dignified, entrepreneurial, and shrewd enough to protect herself and her family so well that she can laugh at the threat of future hardships. And she may not be human. According to the Reverends Eric C.

Fistler and Robb McCoy, many Bible scholars believe that the heroine of this passage is the Spirit of Wisdom, portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures as feminine. That gives us a very different spin. If Wisdom does what's described in this proverb, we're wise to do the same regardless of our gender. And, if we read this in harmony with our Gospel reading, we're especially wise to protect and welcome the children God puts in our care.

This passage from Mark is among those that make me think the disciples were probably pretty young. (My friend Father Rick Larrabee calls them Jesus's youth group.) They don't understand what Jesus is saying when he tries to warn them about his Passion, but they aren't mature enough simply to ask him to say more. They deal with their discomfort by horsing around and boasting about their "greatness," but they don't want to admit it because they know Jesus won't approve. It's just what we might expect from a band of rowdy teenaged boys. Jesus doesn't get angry, as he sometimes does in this gospel. Instead, perhaps with a touch of exasperation, Jesus tries to create a teaching moment. He picks up a nearby child, then explains to his rambunctious disciples that anyone who wishes to be truly great in the Kingdom of God must be willing to welcome even those they would have thought were least, lowliest and last.

As Bible scholar Lamar Williamson Jr. observes, children were held in low esteem in the Greco-Roman world, though the Hebrews are thought to have been more solicitous of their children than the Gentiles were. Either way, we moderns aren't much better. Yes, we love our own children, and we take care of them as well as our personal circumstances and family histories permit. But for all the starry-eyed expressions of devotion to innocent children that get tossed around in public conversations and online, we're remarkably hardhearted and tightfisted when it comes to other people's children, especially if they happen to be refugees or come from families who struggle to pay for their care. We say we love children, but that doesn't mean we're

willing to make sure they get enough to eat, safe housing, decent education, good medical care, or even seatbelts in their school buses. We don't adequately protect them from sexual predators, mass shootings, domestic violence, or bullying. And we aren't doing anywhere near enough to make certain that they and their children can grow up in a habitable world.

Growing up has never been easy, and it's particularly difficult now. Kids are smart, and the Internet gives them access to vast amounts of terrifying information about the deteriorating state of our planet. In 2023, CBS News reported that about two-thirds of kids and young adults worldwide, especially those living in regions hit hard by environmental degradation, struggle with climate anxiety. They are sad, scared, and extremely worried. Dr. Sarah Schwartz, a professor of psychology at Suffolk University in Boston, told CBS that kids "know that the world is going to be a harder, darker, scarier place ... and imagining themselves in that world feels really scary for them." Don't mistake climate anxiety for an emotional disorder. Dr. Schwartz correctly argues that it's a valid response to the situation in the world. So, if you're also worried about the future of our planet, you have reason to be and you're in excellent company.

But dire as our situation seems to be, we can look to James the Just, Jesus's younger brother, for advice on how to bequeath a better, cleaner, safer world to our children. James draws a clear distinction between earthly wisdom, which is ambitious, envious, and self-serving, and Godly wisdom, which is peaceable, merciful, and willing to yield. Earthly wisdom produces disorder and wickedness. Godly wisdom ushers in the Kingdom of Heaven, and Godly wisdom is something that we Christians actually know a lot about.

In her excellent book, *Stewards of Eden*, Dr. Sandra L. Richter makes a compelling case that our environmental problems require a spiritual solution, not just a scientific or political one, because environmental degradation has been caused not by need, but by greed. Environmental

issues have been highly politicized but, from the perspective of Kingdom politics, Creation care is not a partisan matter. Richter writes, “our God-given calling is to serve as witnesses to the fact that all things have been created by [God] and for [God]. Thus, in this fallen world, the role of the redeemed community is to live our lives as an expression of another Kingdom, to reorient our values to those of our heavenly Father, to live our lives ... as Jesus Christ has.” If we are to heal our world, we must change the morality of our culture, something that scientists and politicians have so far failed to do but, perhaps, a community of faithful people can.

As Richter observes, “[a]t its best very best, the church has led the way on abolition, temperance, homelessness, orphan and foster care, medical services for the least of these, and civil rights. At our best we have built more orphanages and hospitals than any other single organization on this planet. At our best we have ... embraced our role as the moral compass of society, confronted corruption, and defended the voiceless. Can we do it again?” she asks. For the sake of our children, I believe we can and we must.

Our efforts may not always succeed. Richter writes, “I do not anticipate that the church will be able to *fix* all (or even most) of the environmental woes of our planet any more than we will be able to end every war, adopt every orphan, or free every young woman trapped in the sex trade. But I do believe that we can stand boldly with the opposition ... The fact that our message is countercultural in no way releases us from the prophetic task at hand. A light in the darkness, leaven in the lump: that is who we are.” Although Richter is right, I think we can be a bit more hopeful. If we draw upon Godly wisdom and humbly ask for God's help, we can enjoy the “harvest of righteousness sown in peace” that James promises to those who willingly submit to God's law. That, dear friends, will allow us to improve the health of our world and welcome our children into a future that they can safely inhabit. May the good Lord make it so. Amen.