Malcolm Clemens Young Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C40 Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16

16 Pentecost (Proper 21C) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist 1 Timothy 6:6-19

Sunday 25 September 2022 (Michaelmas) Luke 16:19-31

**We Are the Ancient Ones**

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Lk. 16).

What will you do with this wonderful, mysterious life that you have been given?

Imagine that you were born in Africa 300,000 years ago and you experienced the whole life of the very first human being ever born. Then immediately afterwards you were to live the full life of the second human being.[[1]](#endnote-1) And then every human being since then, all the way to the baby being born as I complete this sentence. Your life would consist of all these “lifetimes, lived consecutively.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Your experience would be very different from the history books. Famous people like the Buddha, Confucius, Mary (the mother of Jesus), Isaac Newton and Jane Austen would account for only an infinitesimal part of your experience. Most of your life would consist of ordinary social interactions. It would include a lot of worrying, working and social conflict over status and inclusion. You would feel a great deal of awe and wonder too.

This life would last for four trillion years. A tenth of that time you would be a hunter-gatherer. For 60% you would be in a farming family. You would spend 20% of your time raising children, 20% growing food. 2% of your time would be dedicated to religious ritual like this. For 1% of your life you would have malaria or small pox. You would spend 1.5 billion years engaged in sex and 250 million years giving birth. You would experience terrible suffering, war and brutality. For 10% of the time you would own other human beings and another 10% you would be enslaved yourself.

This brings us to our very unique circumstances as modern people. Substantial population growth means that a third of your life would have occurred after the year 1200 AD and a quarter of it after 1750. As a result during many of your years you would experience massive social changes around the industrial revolution, modern colonialism, the emergence of democracy, capitalism, contemporary science, civil rights movements, etc.

You would spend 150 years in outer space. For one week you would walk on the moon. Fifteen percent of your experience would be of people who are alive today. William MacAskill uses this thought experiment to give us an insight into human nature and a broader perspective of our place in the world. But he also does it to alert us to a pressing but often overlooked issue, our responsibility for the people of the future.

He points out that if human beings last as long as the average mammalian species (which is 1 million years) and even at a population of a tenth of our current size then 99.5 percent of human life would be ahead of us. It seems likely that the vast, vast, vast majority of all the people who will ever live have not even been born yet. And we have a responsibility to them. We are the ancient ones. We are the forebears choosing a course that will bring suffering or joy to the trillions of people who follow us.

Jesus presents us with another thought experiment that he hopes will change our vision and how we live. The religious leaders, who Luke notes are “lovers of money,” hear Jesus’ parable from last week about the unrighteous manager and “ridicule him” (Lk. 16:14). Jesus responds saying, “God knows your hearts, for what is prized by human beings is an abomination to God.”

Then he tells a story that we hardly ever hear at Grace Cathedral and that I have not preached about for twenty-one years. Luke the author of this Gospel cares intensely about poverty and generosity. In his story Jesus is born poor in a barn, Mary in the Magnificat announces that God fills the hungry with good things, there are scores of examples of Jesus bringing good news to the poor, the earliest church shares all things in common.

This morning Jesus does not give us a philosophical dissertation on the afterlife. Like the image of a 4 trillion year lifetime, the point of this picture is to wake us up, so that we can see the world as it really is. A rich man in purple delights in his sensuality and his feasts.[[3]](#endnote-3) At his gate, Lazarus longs for leftovers, as the dogs lick his sores. His name el-Azar means “God has helped.” We wonder if the rich man even knows his name.

The two die and the rich man sees Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. He calls out “Father Abraham” eleēson, “have mercy on me.” Send Lazarus to cool my tongue. Abraham points out the great chasm separating the two realms. Then the rich man tells Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five siblings. Abraham concludes the story saying that if the rich man’s siblings do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Lk. 16).

1. One thing I love about this story is that for Jesus, the poor man has a name - Lazarus. And what strikes me with such force is that over his life this rich man has created such an absolute barrier between Lazarus and himself that even after death, when everything should be clear, he cannot see his humanity. He looks at Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, and he cannot recognize him as anything other than his inferior, as someone who exists to serve him.

Sharing what we have may be very difficult. But really seeing the humanity and dignity of the people we encounter, that might be even harder. Every time I walk through the Tenderloin wearing my clerical collar and saying hi to the people I encounter, I am surprised by the openness and respect of the people in this city who have the least. In that setting people regard the collar as a sign that because of Jesus I might be more ready to see their dignity. In their eyes I see the hope that they might be meeting someone who understands them.

2. Earlier in the Book of Luke, John the Baptist warns the people who come out to the desert, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’” (Lk. 3). For Luke, what matters is not who your people are, or what tribe you belong to, it is about what you do.

In the third century Augustine understood this. The thirty year old Augustine was experiencing every form of success. He was wildly popular and successful. He had a beautiful concubine, a wonderful son, a prestigious professorship, a bright political career and the prospects of great wealth through a strategic marriage. But Augustine felt miserable. He writes, “I panted for honors, for money, for marriage.”[[4]](#endnote-4) And yet despite getting everything he wanted he felt profoundly empty.

One day Augustine was feeling career pressure (he had to lie about the virtues of the emperor in a public speech). He noticed a very poor man who was drunk and laughing. Augustine envied his light heartedness. If someone asked if he would rather be under great stress or happy like this man, he would rather be like this man. But if someone asked if he would rather be the beggar or himself he would choose himself. He could not let go of the honors that were making him miserable.

Eventually Augustine began to see that faith not as a mental state of believing but a changed life based on trusting God. Something in him opened and he became capable of receiving great joy.

3. The last thing I want to point out about this story is that according to Luke, Moses and the prophets are enough. Jesus has not come to add something to the Jewish faith or to replace it with something new. He has called our attention to the truths we already know about loving God and each other. We see these in Moses and the Prophets and in other religions, other forms of piety.

This week at Joan Silva’s funeral I mentioned that in this church we teach our children that prophets are people who are so close to God and God is so close to them that they know what to do. For me, the Persian mystical poet Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) is a prophet. He writes, “Let the beauty we love be what we do / There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Elsewhere Rumi writes, “Whatever you can think is perishable. / That which enters no thought, that’s God!”[[6]](#endnote-6) I see in Rumi the deep love of God that I also experience in Jesus. Rumi longs for God and writes,

“When I seek peace, he is / the kindly intercessor, / And when I go to war, / the dagger, that is he; / And when I come to meetings, / he is the wine and the sweetmeat. / And when I come to gardens, / the fragrance, that is he. / When I go to the mines, deep / he is the ruby there, / When I delve in the ocean, / the precious pearl is he. / When I come to the desert, / he is a garden there. / When I go to the heaven, / the brilliant star is he… / And when I write a letter / to my beloved friends, / The paper and the inkwell, / the ink, the pen is he. / And when I write a poem / and seek a rhyming word – / The one who spreads the rhymes out / within my thought, is he!”[[7]](#endnote-7)

We are the ancient ones. We are the forebears choosing a course that will bring suffering or joy to the trillions of people who follow us. Faith is the gift which sees every person’s dignity. Faith is the way we act, how we respond to God’s love. Faith is the question: What will you do with this wonderful, mysterious life that you have been given?

Images:

Early Humans (perhaps evolving along a line?)

Cover of What We Owe the Future

Jalaluddin Rumi

Inkwell and ink

1. <https://bigthink.com/starts-with-a-bang/first-humans-on-earth/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future* (NY: Basic Books, 2022) 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. eujfraino/menoß This word means to rejoice, cheer and is used for the rich fool in Luke 12:19. “And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 17 Pent (9-30-01) 21C. Augustine, *Confessions*. Tr. Rex Warner (NY: Mentor-Omega, 1963) 119f. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jalaluddin Rumi tr. Coleman Barks, *Rumi: The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Annemarie Schimmel, *I Am Wind You Are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992) 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 44-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)