Malcolm Clemens Young Isaiah 11:1-10

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C51 Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

2 Advent (Year A) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist Romans 15:4-13

Sunday 4 December 2022 Matthew 3:1-12

**Are There Reasons to Have Hope? An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew**

“Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that… by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15).

1. Let me speak frankly. I see you might be the, “sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. There are plenty, younger than you or less young, who live in the expectation of extraordinary experiences: from sermons, from people, from journeys, from events, from what tomorrow has in store.”

“But not you. You know that the best you can expect is to avoid the worst. This is the conclusion you have reached, in your personal life and also in general matters, even international affairs. What about [sermons]? Well, precisely because you have denied it in every other field, you believe you may still grant yourself legitimately this youthful pleasure of expectation in a carefully circumscribed area like the field of [sermons], where you can be lucky or unlucky, but the risk of disappointment isn’t serious.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

The twentieth century novelist Italo Calvino (1923-1985) wrote these words about books and I begin here because it is human nature to be wary about hoping too much. We have been disappointed enough in the past to wonder, are there reasons to have hope?

I have been reading several recently published books by authors who do not believe in God. I’m grateful to have this chance to walk with them and to try to see the world from their perspectives. Last week I finished reading Kieran Setiya’s book *Life Is Hard: How Philosophy Can Help Us Find Our Way*. His last chapter describes hope as, “wishful thinking.” He goes on to say, “In the end, it seems, there is no hope: the lights go out.” And later in a slightly more positive vein he says, “We can hope that life has meaning: a slow, unsteady march towards a more just future.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

The other book is William MacAskill’s *What We Owe the Future* about how we might try to prevent the collapse of human culture from threats like nuclear war, engineered pathogens, and runaway Artificial General Intelligence. He points out the massive amount of suffering among human beings and animals. He uses a scale from -100 to +100 to measure the lifetime suffering or happiness of an abstract person and wonders if, because of the total amount of suffering, life is even worth living.

By the way the question “does life have meaning,” is not something that we see in ancient writings or even in the medieval or early modern period. The phrase, “the meaning of life” originates only 1834.[[3]](#endnote-3) Before that time it did not occur to ask this question perhaps because most people assumed that we live in a world guided by its creator.

Although these books might seem so different they share a common spirit. First, you may not know what to expect but it will be a human thing. There is no help for us beyond ourselves. Second, they exaggerate the extent to which human beings can comprehend and control the world. Third, they fail to recognize that there are different stories for understanding our place in the universe and that these have a huge influence on our fulfillment. Well-being is in part subjective: we have to decide whether to accept our life as an accident, or to accept it as a gift. Finally, these authors lack a sense that human beings have special dignity or that we might experience God as present with us.

In my Forum conversation with Cornel West the other week he mentioned how much he loved Hans-Georg Gadamer’s book *Truth and Method.* It’s about the importance of interpretation in human consciousness and begins with a poem from the twentieth century Austrian writer Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). “Catch only what you’ve thrown yourself, all is mere skill and little gain; / but when you’re suddenly the catcher of a ball / thrown by an eternal partner / with accurate and measured swing / towards you, to your center, in an arch / from the great bridgebuilding of God: / why catching then becomes a power - / not yours, a world’s.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

2. How do we catch the world God is offering to us? This morning I am going to discuss an interpretation of the Book of Matthew by my friend the biblical scholar Herman Waetjen. I am not trying to communicate facts to you or to explain something. I long to open a door so that you might experience the truth of hope, the recognition that at the heart of all reality lies the love of God.

Today is the second Sunday in the church calendar. Over the next twelve months during worship we will be reading through the Gospel of Matthew. Scholars say that 600 of the 1071 verses in it, along with half of its vocabulary come from the Gospel of Mark. An additional 225 verses come from a saying source and other oral traditions.[[5]](#endnote-5) And yet this Gospel is utterly original. Although the first hearers are highly urban people living in the regional capital of Antioch, really Matthew speaks directly to us.

In the year 70 CE a catastrophic event threatened to obliterate the entire religion of the Jews. Roman forces crushed an uprising in Jerusalem destroying God’s earthly residence, the temple, and many of the rituals and traditions that defined the Jewish religion. Without the temple a new way of being religious had to be constructed. Let me tell you about three alternative visions for the faith from that time.

First there was the way of the Pharisees led by Yohanan ben Zakkai (50-80 CE). Legend held that he had been secreted out of Jerusalem during the destruction in a coffin. HE then made an arrangement with Roman authorities to remain subject to them but with limited powers of self-government.

Zakkai asserted that the study of Torah was as sacred as the Temple sacrifices. “He substituted chesed (kindness or love) in place of the demolished temple.”[[6]](#endnote-6) God can be at the center of people’s lives through “a reconciliation that is realizable through deeds of mercy that are fulfilled by observing the law.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Waetjen asserts that the Gospel of Matthew criticizes this vision because it leads to a distinction between righteous (moral) people who are clean and sinful outsiders.

A second solution to this religious crisis comes from apocalyptic literature about the end of the world, especially the Second Book of Baruch. This author writes about the Babylonian destruction of the Jewish Temple in 487 BCE. In his vision an angel descends to the Temple, removes all the holy things and says, “He who guarded the house has left it” (2 Baruch 8:2). The keys are thrown away almost as if it was de-sanctified. According to this view,“in the present the temple has no significance.” But in the future it will be renewed in glory through the power of God. So the people wait for God’s return.

Although Matthew is aware of both these answers to the religious crisis he chooses a third way beyond a division between clean and unclean people, or simply waiting for a new Temple. Matthew writes that Jesus as Son of David comes out of a particular people, with its history, etc., but Jesus is also a new creation which Waetjen translates as the Son of the Human Being.[[8]](#endnote-8)

We see this dual anthropology in the Hebrew bible with its division of soul/self (or nephesh) and flesh (basar). In Greek this is soul/self (psyche) and body (soma). Jesus says, “Do not continue to fear those who kill the body (soma) but cannot kill the soul; but rather continue to fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna” (Mt. 10:28).

In a physical body Jesus is born in Bethlehem as part of the Jewish community where he teaches and heals those who come to him. Jesus also exists also as soul, as the divine breath that gives all creatures life, as the first human being of the new creation, as one who shows God’s love for every person. He teaches that at the heart of all things lies forgiveness and grace. There are no people defined by their righteousness or sinfulness. At the deepest level of our existence we are connected to each other and to God.

The novelist Marilynne Robinson writes about how in modern times some people claim that science shows that there are no non-material things, that we do not have a soul. In contrast she writes about our shared intuition that the soul’s “non-physicality is no proof of its non-existence… [It is] the sacred and sanctifying aspect of human being. It is the self that stands apart from the self. It suffers injuries of a moral kind, when the self it is and is not lies or steals or murders but it is untouched by the accidents that maim the self or kill it.”

She concludes writing, “I find the soul a valuable concept, a statement of the dignity of a human life and of the unutterable gravity of human action and experience.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Can we have hope? Does life have meaning? Let me speak frankly. I see you might be the “sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything.” But you have a soul. God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. At the heart of all reality exists the love of God. The more thankful we are, the more we receive the gift of hope.

My last words come from a poem by Mary Oliver called “The Gift.”

“Be still, my soul, and steadfast. / Earth and heaven both are still watching / though time is draining from the clock / and your walk, that was confident and quick, / has become slow.// So, be slow if you must, but let / the heart still play its true part. / Love still as you once loved, deeply / and without patience. Let God and the world / know you are grateful. That the gift has been given.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Production Notes:

Please include the Romans quote (“Whatever was written in former days…”

Images:

Italo Calvino

Cornel West

Herman Waetjen

Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem

Marilynne Robinson

Mary Oliver

1. Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* tr. William Weaver (London: Vintage Classics, 1981) 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kieran Setiya, *Life Is Hard: How Philosophy Can Help Us Find Our Way* (NY: Riverhead Books, 2022) 173, 179, 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “The meaning of life” first appears in Thomas Carlyle’s novel *Sartor Resartus*. Ibid., 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rainer Maria Rilke, “Catch only what you’ve thrown yourself” in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method, 2nd Revised Edition* tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (NY: Crossroad, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Herman Waetjen, *Matthew’s Theology of Fulfillment, Its Universality and Its Ethnicity: God’s New Israel as the Pioneer of God’s New Humanity* (NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017) 1-17. See also, <https://www.biblememorygoal.com/how-many-chapters-verses-in-the-bible/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesed> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (NY: Picador, 2015) 8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. <https://wildandpreciouslife0.wordpress.com/2016/09/27/the-gift-by-mary-oliver/> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)