

Boarding the Boat for the Advent Journey – Brian Hartley

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

On a scale from one to ten, my brief stint as a Youth Minister would probably rate between a one and a two—and then only because of my wife, whom everyone loved and admired, and who had a keener instinct for working with teens than I'll ever have. The classic example of my ineptness was my choice of films to launch the new year—an annual event where teens are locked in overnight to reflect on the nature of Christian discipleship by playing a juvenile game they call “Sardines.” Scouring the film catalogues, as we did in those days, for a 16-mm. film sure to hold their attention I chose an adaptation of Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*. Though I couldn't get the original in Russian, complete with sub-titles, I naively thought that contemplating life in a Russian gulag through the eyes of a prisoner would be sure to interest American adolescents. Had I known in those days how different my strengths were than the average teenager, perhaps I would not have made this unsightly faux pas. Fortunately, my lack of mechanical skill paid off for once when I failed to be able to un-jam the spool of film that kept getting caught in the machine (a predicament with which a few of you may be able to empathize if you actually can remember those days before VHS and CD players were invented).

For those of you who have never had the privilege of either reading the book or seeing the film, Solzhenitsyn's story moves at something of a snail's pace—in fact, it makes a film like “The Strait Story” seem to blaze along at lightning speed. Poor Ivan Shukov wakes up sick and spends the day shuffling through a series of ignominious actions inflicted upon him by the guards at a brutally cold construction site. Anything above -42 F is considered bearable and means that the prisoners must go outside to toil on meagerly rations and without adequate clothing. These prisoners are morose and dehumanized at every possible turn—reduced to numbers before their captors. I suppose if someone had been tempted to make a somewhat-over-the-top film of me trying to show the movie to our youth group, they would have portrayed teens variously jumping out the window, hanging themselves, or slitting their wrists. I am sure that it would service well as something of a parody of how not to run a youth program.

But that sense of desperation and loss of meaning, though perhaps overblown for us, may not be all that far away from how many people feel during this long stretch of time from Thanksgiving till Christmas. While many of us may enjoy the warmth of times spent together as family, for others the mere thought of returning home brings gloom and dread. One recent blog post even compiled a list of nineteen fictional dysfunctional families for Thanksgiving reading (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/24/thanksgiving-day-2010-dys_n_787247.html#s189250), while the Oakland Examiner urged its readers to “get into the holiday spirit by viewing indie films about dysfunctional families for the holiday,”

<http://www.examiner.com/indie-movie-in-oakland/indie-thanksgiving-dysfunctional-family-film-fun>). Clearly, there's a lot of latent hostility, not to mention downright depression, being produced when it comes to the clash between our unrealistic holiday expectations and the concrete reality of brokenness that exists for so many.

So, into the midst of this chaos and hyperbolic emotion the church dares to begin yet another new year as we drape our sanctuaries this morning in the purples and blues of the Advent season. And while KEZK has been playing Christmas tunes ever since All Saints' Day, we deign to throw a monkey wrench into the whole engine of American consumerism shouting, "Wait! Wait! We have four more weeks in which to slog through the gulag of Advent!" While the culture is encouraging us to deck the halls and rush the nearest store for Black Friday specials, we Christians are insisting on paying no attention to that man behind the curtain. This morning, then, my task is to try and beckon you to the long haul, to a life of patient endurance, in a culture hell-bent on instant gratification and the purchase of the next new thing.

Perhaps no biblical story illustrates Christ's call to this way of life in quite so poignant a fashion as does the narrative of Noah and the ark. And so, here in Matthew's gospel where Jesus' teachings are divided up into five large blocks, we encounter the Master making one final attempt on the Mount of Olives with his disciples to prepare them for his death and all that will follow. These disciples are soon to face the question that many of us wonder about, at least in private, on many days: How are we to live in a world coming apart at the seams? Jesus uses apocalyptic language to try and answer that question in an attempt to thwart others who are using the same type of language to create fear and even insurrection. Throughout, his primary emphasis is placed on readiness and preparation—not on trying to predict how or when things will happen. In fact, he insistently challenges those who try to predict the future.

In his commentary on this gospel, Stanley Hauerwas yokes this readiness of the disciple to the need to prepare for a life lived in anticipation. He says, "Endurance is the way of the disciple between the time of Jesus and the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom throughout the world," (Matthew, Brazos Commentary, 202). And this endurance, he suggests, is predicated on keeping our focus on Jesus, not on all that is going on around us. In this larger piece of teaching, Jesus will dredge up the language of the book of Daniel in which Antiochus Euphrones' attack upon the temple, known as the "desolating sacrilege," horrified the Jews. For the disciples, though they may well miss the reference, their "desolating sacrilege," the signal that the entire cosmos is being violated will take place in the passion of Jesus—even though their eyes may be fastened elsewhere. And, like them, we, too, may have our focus misplaced during this season on to-do lists, wrapping packages, even over-decorating our homes.

That is why I think children have much to teach us in terms of paying attention to the most important things. Tuesday night I went somewhat grouchy from a spirited faculty meeting to take up my post at the local IGA to ring bells for the Salvation Army. Now, my wife will tell you that I have a bit of Ebenezer Scrooge in me and I am not overly enamored with doing my civil

duty. But, as I told the Fenton's, I hear the voice of Dan Jensen in my ear reminding me that "all men are wretches," and I don't want to be counted among them. So, I donned my warm tuc, bundled up, and set up shop just outside the front door. Watching people's reactions as they approach is something of a hobby of mine. Some people don't like to make eye contact. Maybe it's a sense of guilt, maybe they are just too preoccupied—I don't know. Others get a panicked look as if I am going to subject them to a TSA patdown to claim their last dollar if they don't fork over some money. But the best of all are the children. "Mommy, can I have some money for the old man?" a cute little girl asks, believing that I am starving and need to be taken care of. And then there is the rather husky little boy whose pudgy fingers reach up as high as he can possibly raise them to try and drop in his offering of one penny after another. And, finally, come the gaggle of little girls with their eyes open wide, jumping around the kettle in sheer joy as they shower me with nickels, dimes, and quarters. All of these children, you see, are absolutely taking pleasure in the opportunity to give.

Like the apostle Paul says to the Romans, they lay aside all their other desires for tootsie rolls and nachos, chocolate bars and chewing gum, and come with glee to the little red kettle. And, in so doing, they demonstrate for this crusty middle-aged grandfather what it means to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," (Romans 13:14). They are like the "many peoples" in the Isaiah text who look forward with anticipation to climbing the hill to the mountain of the Lord's house (Isaiah 2:2-3). We, on the other hand, get caught up in the necessities of life: earning a living, paying the bills, generally trying to keep our noses clean. We try so hard to keep our heads above water. We think such long thoughts, manipulate such long words, and both listen to and preach such long sermons. But in our concern to be adults, somewhere along the way we forget the mystery of the season and it stands in danger of just becoming another chore for us, of losing not only its meaning but its sheer wonder and joy.

Advent offers to us that rare opportunity to reclaim both our hope for the future as well as a way of living in the present. Despite all of the hustle and bustle, the purple of the Advent season cries out for us to slow down, to learn to pay attention, to reclaim that ineffable sense of childlike awe and mystery that, as Frederick Buechner suggests, "makes hope not only possible, but strangely tangible." During Advent, we are given the opportunity to wake up to life and to notice the small signs of God's appearing all around us. In the midst of final exams, numerous parties, and the lengthening darkness, we wait with baited breath the coming of our Lord. Pregnant moments these; moments Buechner says, "when everybody is leaning forward to hear what will happen even though (we) already know what will happen and what will not happen, when (we) listen hard for meaning, their meaning, and begin to hear, only faintly at first, the beating of unseen wings," (The Magnificent Defeat, 61).

If you wander down into the catacombs of Rome, you will discover there a few fading pieces of mosaic artwork that suggest to us how those early Christians sought to live out their calling to watch and wait—perhaps the children and the grandchildren of those to whom Paul was writing in today's epistolary lesson. There you will see a picture of the good shepherd—a favorite way of portraying the role of the Messiah as one who watches over his flock. But one of the most

popular Old Testament narratives which those early Christians incorporated for themselves was that picture mentioned earlier conjured up by Jesus of Noah and the ark. Off in the distance you can see their neighbors carousing and living it up while the old man and his family patiently labor on the boat. There is not a cloud in the sky and the neighborhood is alive with the guffaws of those who now, slightly inebriated, are openly laughing at the befuddled old guy gone off his rocker. But still, the work goes on with ever-greater intensity even while the world outside marches to the beat of a different drummer.

You see, those early Christians attached themselves to the Noah story and lived out their calling as the church—the ekklesia (the “called-out-ones”)—as passengers on the boat. The boat in a very real way became the primary symbol for the church—God’s primary instrument of redemption and salvation for a broken and hurting world. And so, about this time four years ago as I was nearing the end of my sabbatical at St. John’s in Minnesota, the snow began to descend upon us and the wind picked up force Saturday afternoon and I pondered whether to trudge up the hill for evening vespers. Back here in Greenville a winter storm was about to descend cutting off many of you from electricity for days. While a few hundred miles north I wrote in my journal, “Winter has come to Minnesota—the temperature has been dropping all day and it is supposed to hit zero with twenty-below windchill tonight.” Within a few days, we would all simply be hoping for anything above zero for a high.

But, ascend that hill I did with the wind whistling in my ears and the snow stinging my eyes. At times, I could hardly see ahead and struggled to stay on the path. But then, right on cue, the bells of the monastic church began to peal out loud and clear overpowering the sound of the headwind. And so, I followed the sound of the bells when all else failed, up past the frozen lake, beyond the football field and the printing house where the St. John’s Bible was being copied out by hand. And finally I came under the shelter of that big concrete building as the bells finished their work and I stepped into the silence of the church. It was deathly dark inside, aside from a string of candles which pierced the darkness. The Benedictine monks huddled close together for warmth while I stood there with two nuns and Kathleen Norris waiting to process up the nave and into the chancel where we would say our round of prayers. The wind continued to howl outside but we, we were safe within the ark of the church on this cold Advent evening which dwelt on the cusp of another cold Minnesota winter.

“Waiting is not a very popular attitude,” wrote Henri Nouwen. “Waiting is not something that people think about with great sympathy. In fact most people consider waiting a waste of time,” (Watch for the Light, 27). But waiting is exactly what we are called to in this season—waiting in wonderment while we gather in the ark called the church. It is here in the Christian community that we keep the flame alive and learn to live with courage trusting and hoping in the coming of our Lord. And we do so in the spirit of those children who gathered at my little red kettle a few nights ago knowing that we are a part of something much bigger. So, consider this your invitation to board the boat for the Advent journey ahead. Let us make ourselves ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour (Matthew 24:44).