

Generous Toward God

On Earth as in Heaven: God's Call for Justice 6

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Psalm 123, Matthew 25: 14-30

A few years back I went to see a live performance by a podcast team called Radiolab on NPR. The Show was called Apocalyptico. In this performance, the hosts explored what happened to the dinosaurs, back early in earth's life, about 66 million years ago, and specifically explore one theory about the dinosaurs extinction – the one about the asteroid, but a version that was updated with some of the latest scientific facts.

In essence, the theory is this – that a really big asteroid hit the earth in Mexico, and it threw up a bunch of stone into the air that caught fire, which rained back down on earth as heated gas, and basically burned up all the dinosaurs on the planet. After I saw the show, a friend commented, "I never wept for the dinosaurs until last night."

And yet, as sad as the dinosaur story is, within the apocalyptic story is also the story of a new beginning on earth – that space was made in the ecosystem for mammals – small mammals with dens below the surface of the earth- and therefore, for us. Without the deadly asteroid, our developmental trajectory as humans is not possible.

Somewhere in the evening, one of the hosts even said something to the effect, "Resurrection is not always for those who died. Sometimes it is something else that comes to life."

Any dream worth dreaming will likely take generations to fulfill. Women's suffrage took over 75 years to accomplish in the United States. Civil rights for minorities took generations, and full rights for others such as the LGBTQIA communities are still unfolding. We who see God's dreams are not likely to see their fulfillment, but we can see their beginning, even if the end is ours, and the beginning is for someone else.

Our Matthew text has a long view in mind: Here we have an owner of slaves, and he becomes judgmental against one of them in ways that feel – sullied, I guess is the word.

But let's remember the lesson of apocalyptic visions – that something has to die for something new to be born. Matthew is much more interested in *using* ultimate judgment as a future/present, as a way of encouraging an engagement with rather than a burying of talents.

We Christians believe we live between two times – the resurrection, and Parousia – the end times. What the church does in this crucial time between resurrection and Parousia is key. Theologian Sallie McFague argues that metaphors have an is/is not quality.¹ The “is” of this metaphor is the absence of the master who nonetheless has “entrusted his property to them” (Matthew 25:14) and intends to return to settle accounts. And yet, this parable is narrated by Jesus himself, the one who since we learn at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel is both “Son of Abraham” and “Son of David”; the one through whom God’s broadest and most royal promises have even now under the crucifying Empire are coming to fulfillment.

For all the difficulties of this parable, its vision of our anticipation of Jesus’ return and what we would say to that is what matters. To that limited extent, its metaphor helps as a goad for faithfulness in the present. This is what to remember about Matthew: words and faithful deeds -- they’re ultimately inseparable.

I think about the dreams that my parents had for me and my brother and her niece’s children. Because my mother and father wanted to see us get an education, I was fortunate to get the support to go to college, and because we had good state scholarships, I went to a very good private college here in California, and graduated with a modest amount of debt. My mother’s legacy lives on today through her estate – with funding for my cousin’s children to go to graduate school if they choose. One already has and works as a social worker for a county court in California.

Such generosity makes me think about what legacies our churches might dream of today. We who have inherited the buildings and funds from those who were faithful in previous generations, what will we make of their legacy? Will we plan, as many of us do in our own lives, for the continuation of the faithfulness of God’s works beyond our little faith community?

The dream of people not destroying anyone anywhere (verse 25) remains to be seen. So does the dream of housing and food security for all people (verses 21-22). But the signs of the budding of the other dreams are around us, and we can participate in them, giving witness to God’s kingdom and Jesus as its king, if we will.

After the aftermath, as when this prophetic vision was proclaimed and written, it may be just such a vision, such a hope, that will see us through, by giving new life, whether it be our own, or helping others to find theirs.

I think it involves taking risks, risks to think beyond what we have believed. As we enter a time of reflection about Faith in its present form and where we might go before beginning the pastoral search, we'll be asking questions like this:

What heritage do we have for going through difficult times and coming out strong?

What consequences have we been reluctant to face because we would need to make a change?

What places have we gone, to find out that God met us there?

What goal have we hid from because we have felt inadequate?

In the parable, it is the fearful slave who buries his talent who is judged. So let us risk takers for God, and bring attitudes of generosity to thinking about what it means to be the body of Christ in the world.

When we ask these questions, we become the seekers that Jesus teaches us to be.
We do not go alone.
We walk with Jesus.

Pilgrims go on journeys knowing that they don't know what is to come, that in beginning the journey, the outcome isn't clear. The journey might lead to death, it might transform one's life. But pilgrims decide to go on the journey anyway, trusting in God, and trusting in the power of the journey.

In closing, I want to share this poem by Spaniard Antonio Machado¹:

Why give the name of roads
to the furrows of chance?
Anyone journeying walks
like Jesus on the sea.

Every man has two
battles to wage:
in dreams he wrestles with God;
awake, with the sea.
Wayfarer, the only way
is your footsteps, there is no other.

Wayfarer, there is no way,
you make the way as you go.
As you go, you make the way
and stopping to look behind,
you see the path that your feet
will never travel again.
Wayfarer, there is no way --
only foam trails in the sea.

All passes and all remains;
but our lot is to pass,
to pass making roads,
making roads in the sea.
Amen.