

“Lightning In A Bottle”

Matthew 24:36-44

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Preached December 2, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

There are people who, with great diligence and seriousness, spend a lot of time trying to catch lightning in a bottle. Most of these people are gamblers and dreamers and vagabonds trying to get rich quick or without a lot of work, but a few of them are that breed of Christian who, despite Jesus admonition about unpredictability of the “day of the Lord,” that end-of-the-age coming of Christ in glory, and despite Jesus’ gift to us of divine ignorance when he said, “about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,” try to calculate exactly when that day will come. This breed of Christian has survived the religious ice ages -- the ages of Enlightenment and Aquarius -- and just when you think it might go extinct, the millennium comes along and revives the breed and it goes on in its quest of something more elusive even than the Holy Grail itself: the day and the hour of the Lord’s coming.

Trying to catch lightning in a bottle is a figure of speech, of course, about luck mostly, but also about the futility and foolishness of trying to do something one ought not to do, like try to trap something as huge, elusive, and potentially deadly as lightning in a container as easily broken as a bottle. In tonight’s lesson from Matthew, and even more so in the passages before and after it, we are offered a glimpse of a terrifying future, one which you would think everyone would run

from, a future of never-ending war, famine and earthquake; torture, persecution, and betrayal; a time when false prophecy and lawlessness increase while love grows cold, when it will be terrible for the pregnant women and nursing mothers who must flee the coming doom. Indeed, Jesus even describes his coming by comparing it to lightning in verse 27: “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” And yet, despite all that horror, there are still faithful persons who are standing there with their little bottles trying to catch that unpredictable lightning, trying to predict when and where that lightning will strike despite the fact that Jesus tells us that only God knows. I suppose their odds of being struck by lightning are as slim as catching it, so maybe they are not in too much danger, but I do wonder what they could do with all that time spent in the field vainly holding up their little bottles.

Each year on the first Sunday of Advent, the Gospel passages dwell on apocalyptic themes, placing us and the Gospel story as far from the Christmas Eve manger scene as we can possibly get. The caring, compassionate Jesus we tend to prefer will make his appearance soon enough in the account of his birth, but his story cannot be reduced to his characteristics meek and mild. Jesus is, after all, God, and our God has never been accused of being tame. We are invited then at the dawn of Advent each year to reflect on the wilder side of our Messiah, the cloud surfing, angel-commanding conqueror of the forces of evil, for he is what the babe

will become even if we don't live to see it in person, a fact for which we should probably be quite glad.

If there is a better metaphor for that wilder side of Jesus than lightning, I'm not sure what it is, and I love the fact that he describes himself that way. In our passage tonight, it is not lightning which takes one person standing in a field and leaves the other, and it is not lightning which leaves one woman to the grinding of her meal but takes the other, but it sure sounds like it. I happened to have been reading a novel last week about survivors of lightning strikes and in that story, one man is killed by a lightning strike, his body vaporized, while standing next to another who survived. The coming of the Son of Man will be that quick, we are led to believe, as quick as perhaps the fastest thing on the planet. In that book I was reading, "The Ice Queen," its author, Alice Hoffman, describes lightning like this:

"What's the difference between lightning and magic? is a joke common among meteorologists. Magic makes sense. Lightning does not, even to the experts. Lightning is random, unpredictable. It can be as small as a bean or as large as a house. Noisy or silent, ashy or clear. It can be any color – red or white, blue or smoky black – and it seems to have a mind of its own.

Lightning floats down chimneys and enters closed windows, slipping right through the molecules that make up glass. Lightning has its own agenda, most experts say; it can easily cause damage despite all safety efforts. Hide, but it may find you. Plan, but your plan may easily become undone."

That sounds a lot like God to me, end times or not. It also sounds a lot like grace.

Jesus advocates the need for watchfulness in our passage tonight, a watchfulness based on the lightning-like unpredictability of God, but also on the uncertainty of our efforts at maintaining our righteousness. When he compares the future coming of the Son of Man to the coming of the flood in Noah's time, he is reminding us of the need for our attentiveness not just to the blessings of God, but to the God who has given them. There is nothing wrong with eating, drinking, and marrying, gifts of God one and all, but there is something wrong with taking those things for granted, for such inattentiveness is the first step down the slippery slope to the kind of wickedness and evil which, we are told, provoked God to decide to "blot out from the earth the human beings I have created" in Noah's time. The readiness for the coming of the Son of Man then, which Jesus urges to have, is not about waking up just in time to sidestep a bolt of lightning, for none of us are that quick, but to live wisely and faithfully, like heeding the warnings to avoid playing golf in a thunderstorm. The watchfulness to which we are called is not the prediction of the day and the hour of the coming of the Son of Man, so that we can avoid being at the wrong place at the wrong time when the time comes, but rather the perseverance required to be in the right place all the time no matter when the time comes. Indeed, it was staying awake, rather than trying to wake up in the nick of time, that would have prevented the thief from breaking into the house in Jesus'

example. You see, both lightning and thieves have the element of surprise and are quicker than we are.

All of this is not to say that God is about the business of striking us down when we misbehave, nor that the content of our faith is to avoid provoking God to send a lightning bolt our way, either now or at the end of time. Indeed, amidst the horror that is to precede and be a part of the second coming of Christ is the glory of God revealed like never before, and the establishment of the peace and justice illustrated so beautifully in the visions of the prophet Isaiah about a time when we shall practice war no more. This is what we want to stay awake for. This is what we want to be sure not to miss. This is what God will be fighting for throughout the lead up to the coming of the Son of Man. What we want to stay awake for is the heavenly banquet which follows when, because we practice war no more, we will sit at the table together in the kingdom of heaven and enjoy God the way we were made to do. That is why in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper we say: "Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." We say it as a reminder of the promises and as a call to a faithfulness which will give us strength to persevere in showing the world a glimpse of that future banquet when we sit together at Christ's table in the here and now.

I started out by describing that group of Christians who somehow find it spiritually rewarding to try to outguess God and predict the second coming, people trying to catch lightning in a bottle. For the reasons I just described, I can sort of

understand the appeal. They want to capture that moment and hold onto it. The only problem is that their bottle is just too small, no matter how big it may be. You see, you can't bottle grace. For as much as Jesus' second coming is like lightning, God's grace is like lightning, slipping into our world and our lives at unexpected times and in unpredictable ways, finding us even when we don't want to be found, changing plans we really don't want changed. Indeed, if we really want to be ready for Christ's coming, we'll put down our bottles and pick up a nice, heavy piece of a highly conductive metal and stand in the middle of a field in a thunderstorm. Metaphorically, people, metaphorically. If we want to be ready, really ready to experience all of what God has to offer us now and at the second coming, we need to "be the bottle," the vessel into which the power of God's grace is discharged. Like the survivors of real-life lightning strikes, we'll experience some unusual sensations, and we'll be able to do things we could never do before, and we'll never be the same again.

Advent is a season to consider the nature of God's unexpected grace, a grace discharged into the body of a teenaged girl to be revealed to the world nine months later. Mary, the future mother of Jesus, might not have been looking for the lightning-like grace of God, but she was clearly living her life in a way that made her ready for it. Mary caught lightning in a bottle because she was the bottle. May we be the bottle to experience fully the grace of God, once and forever. Amen.