

Happy New Year! Today is the first day of the New Church Year, a time of new beginnings, as indeed is represented by the Advent Wreath this morning. Yet, the passage from Matthew 24 is all about the end times. And in this morning's Gospel reading Jesus tells us about some being taken up and some being left in those end times (see Mt.24:40-41). How strange that we should be reading a Gospel passage about the end of time on this morning, the first morning of the Church year when we are actually celebrating beginnings.



A clue to what's actually going on here appears in a study note in my Bible which says, "It seems that this passage is a description of the last days, which begin with Jesus' incarnation and end with his second coming" ... The last days actually begin with Christ's incarnation. You see the end times really started on that very first Christmas morning. In other words, you and I are already living in the end times. We don't need to wait for the end times, good people, they are already here. God be praised!

Could that be? Could the description of what happens in Matthew already be in progress? Let's look and see. In verse 40, we read, "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left." Could something like that happen, be happening, even today? Well, tell me, in your various groups of friends and colleagues, or school mates aren't there people in these groups that you associate with, are there not people who stand out as believers? You know the ones I'm talking about, the ones that seem to shine for the Lord. You just love to be in their presence because they simply can't help bubbling-over with the joy of the Lord. These pilgrims of God know where they're going, and they know whose leading them there. And they just can't help reveling in that joyful, humble assurance.

And in that same group of friends, or colleagues are there not some people who seem to be constantly wandering; folks who seem to have lost their compass, and lost it a while back. And these good people appear to be totally caught up in the things of this world. And- and this is the real, key question – have you ever stopped to wonder why? Why is it that some people are so clearly led straight toward the loving God they know is waiting for them, and others tend to lose their way so easily?

It's not because some people are nicer, or smarter, or stronger, or better. You just can't be nice enough, or read enough books, or discipline yourself hard enough where God is concerned. The truth is, if you are currently on your journey with a loving God toward his Cross, it is completely and utterly due to His grace and mercy. It's all His doing.

And so, yes, apparently it's true what this morning's Gospel lesson tells us, even today. "Two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one left." In any large group of your acquaintances, there are going to be some who are traveling toward salvation, and some who are on the tragic road of the lost. And if you and I are in that first group of pilgrims, then it is not because of something we have or haven't done. It is only by the Grace of God through the blood of the Cross, that there go we. God be praised!

So, let me ask you, which group do you belong to, to the ones on the pilgrim road, or to the ones who are going to that other place? And you’ll all say, “Why, I’m in the first group, of-course!” And I don’t doubt that you are.

But, if you **are** in that first happy group of believers, the ones who are glory bound, how do people around you know that? What are some of the items of Spiritual clothing with which a believer dresses himself? What are the values of the true believer by which she is easily recognized even in this world?



Depiction of Isaiah’s Holy Mountain from sicutlocusest

Well, I think this morning’s readings point to three of them. The first one is in Isaiah. In Chapter 2, Isaiah’s vision of a redeemed people, the prophet says, “Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Is.3a). So, one of the characteristics of a Pilgrim of God is a thirst for truth, a hunger for instruction from God’s word. Do you have that? Is there a craving, having tasted the love of the Lord, do you have a hunger to know him through the beautiful truths of his Holy Scripture? Do you make his teachings a

core part of your life? Does your day seem somehow empty if you haven’t spent at least a few minutes to read a passage or a Psalm? Well, it should, if you’re really on the Pilgrim Road.

So, a Pilgrim of God values instruction in God’s word. A second core value comes from the Psalm this morning. “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls and quietness within your towers” (Ps.122:6-7). Once you have experienced that peace which passes all understanding, how can you possibly want for any other state of being? It is peace of soul, peace of body, peace of community, peace of the brotherhood of man, peace eternal, it is this peace that the believer desires, because having tasted of it once by the Power of God’s Spirit, the Pilgrim cannot be at peace accept in the presence of His Lord. This yearning to be at peace, at peace with God, at peace in God, this too is a core value of the Pilgrim.

And besides a hunger for instruction through God’s word, and a yearning for that peace found only in God, the pilgrim values above all, one thing more. In the Epistle to the Romans this morning, St. Paul tells us that all the commandments “are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ For love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom.13:9b-10). Ah, but can we really love our neighbor just as much as we love ourselves? Is it even possible for the selfish human heart to behave in such a sublimely selfless way? Yes, once a heart has been transformed, by the incredible mercy of the Lord. Once we come to realize with wonder, the boundless love Our Lord has for us, even in the midst of our brokenness, how He loved us to the very end, then what else can we do except joyously reflect that love back into the lives of others. That’s what you do if you’re on the Pilgrim Road.

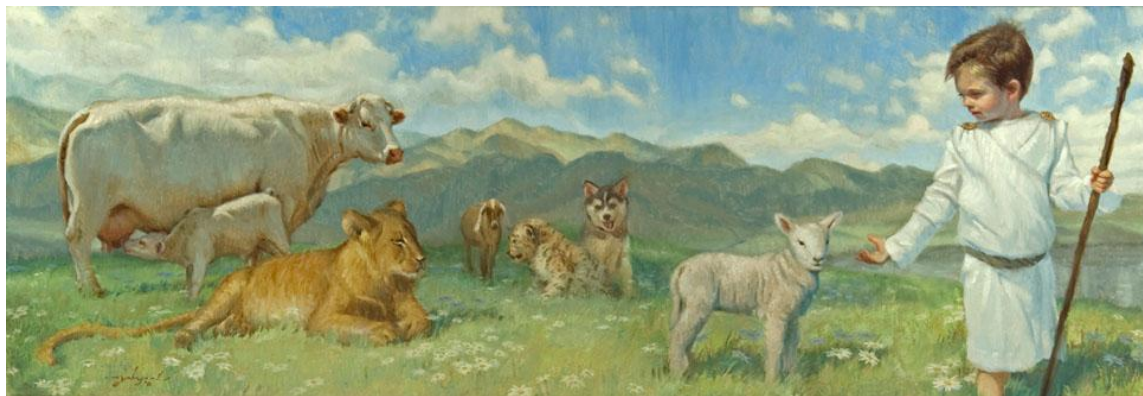
I’m going to have some serious suckin’ up to do with my guardian angels when I get to heaven. Because, boy have I put them through it! It took infinite patience and perseverance to point my feet in the direction of the Cross. And I still wander of the road from time to time as well, and have to be dragged back on course. In fact, by the time I leave the planet, I think the angels assigned to me are probably gonna’ deserve a couple a centuries of R&R! But there are three things we can all do to keep us heading along the Pilgrim Road.

We can live daily, fortified by the nurturing truth of His Word. We can daily seek His peace, and to be instruments of that peace in the world around us. And we can strive to shine his love into a darkened world. Then, we will indeed be wearing the armor of light, which is the clothing of the Pilgrim.

And dear ones, if your feet have wandered off the Pilgrim’s way recently, there is great Good News. For we are, even now, living in the end times which are a season of new beginnings. And the King is coming to God’s people. For we have seen his star in the East. It is time again, O Jerusalem to lift your heads high and shout for joy. For God’s people are being blessed from on high, blessed to walk the pathway of His peace. And behold, a little child shall lead them (Is.11:6).

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jwb+, 11-17-16



Depiction of Is.6:11
“...and a little child shall lead them” by the American artist James Johnson.

Other images can be seen at the website jamesjohnsonart.com