



*Isaiah's Mountain* by John Catanese at [www.catanesed.com/micheles-blog/](http://www.catanesed.com/micheles-blog/)

The beautiful Canticle we heard this morning is taken from *Isaiah* Chapter 12. It begins with praise for the saving God: *“Surely it is God who saves me.”* But you may not have noticed that this comes with some responsibility on our part, because Isaiah goes on to say, *“I will trust in Him and not be afraid.”* This is critical, because being afraid (or worried) is an attack on our faith in God. Anytime we become mired in worry, we are succumbing to an attack on God’s saving grace. A healthy and thoughtful concern for the various pitfalls of life is usually a good thing. But when we start losing sleep, or joy, or the ability to focus on the productive things of life because we have become so mired in obsessive worry about what the future may hold, **that** is most definitely sinful. Jesus has already vanquished the most serious threat the universe can ever throw at any of us – death itself! Don’t we believe that his hands are big enough to deal with our personal problems?

In my Bible the verse reads, *“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”* (Is.12:3) This concept should

sound familiar to you, because we’ve heard it already. When the People of Israel are saved from Pharaoh’s army by the waters of the Red Sea, Moses starts ecstatically praising The Lord. And he uses these exact same words: *“The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”* (See Ex. 15:2a) So, when Isaiah was writing to comfort the Children of Israel and encourage them in the face of the threats from the Assyrian Empire in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, he was reminding them of how God has already proven his love for Israel’s children by freeing them from the bondage in Egypt. There’s also a reminder here about just whose family we belong to. Because, when Moses first uttered these words there on the far shore of the Red Sea, free at last from slavery, he said this: *“The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.”* This is the moment in the history of salvation when God’s children actually reach out and claim their Lord as their own. Before this, Yahweh has been the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (See Exodus 3:6) But now, he has become the God of his people, and by extension our God as well. So, you see when we succumb to consuming worry or fear about what our future holds, we are actually denying our paternity in the divine family tree. Surely this is a sacrifice we dare not make, no matter how challenging life becomes!

These ecstatic words of encouragement from Isaiah are echoed in today’s Epistle. At the end of this passage from *2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians*, Paul encourages the church this way: *“As for the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good.”* Once again, it’s a concept you’ve heard before. In the very first letter he wrote to the Church following his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul writes this to the Galatians: *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not lose heart.”* In Gal. 6:9, Paul ties together good works and hope. Certainly, there is no such thing as “works salvation.” We can’t work our way into heaven. But in doing good for others, we end up strengthening our hope – and by extension, we temper our faith and nourish our love as well. And that is surely the road which leads us to Christian maturity.

The Gospel for today is certainly sobering, but let us look at the so-called “big picture.” We are told here that there will come an end of things. And we are also told that when this terrible moment in the history of the universe comes to be, events will not be gradual but catastrophic. It will be a terrible time of sudden distress, unequalled since the beginning of things. T.S. Elliot was wrong. The way the world ends is not with just a whimper, nor with just a bang<sup>1</sup>; but with a terrible bang followed by short-lived moans of agony. I’m sorry about that, but I didn’t write this stuff down, The Lord did, so I’m afraid we have to come to terms with it.

<sup>1</sup> This concept is expressed in Elliot’s poem “The Hollow Men.”

But, in all of this there is still good news, **the** great good news. Because we read that The Lord is coming back. We proclaim it every Sunday Eucharist in the mystery of faith. "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." The sobering lessons of the Gospel for today is actually the terrible flip side of the coin, but a coin which actually carries emblazoned on it the proof of the glory which awaits us. And every coin must have two sides; you can't have ecstasy if there is no pain. And so, yes, this world in which we live will one day be exposed to terrible anguish, but the glorious truth is that on the other side of that black night of terrible doom there is the glorious dawn of our returning King. Because He's coming back, and we will rise to meet Him. (See 1Thes.5:16)

My wife is a professional researcher. Skilled in using the internet and with a graduate degree in Library Sciences, her services are often retained when clients need to be fully informed about a particular company or technology. Over time, she has learned to determine right at the very beginning of any research project about "the questions beneath the question." Often, a client will ask Donna to discover whatever she can determine about a particular technology or a possible investment opportunity. But Donna has learned through years of experience to carefully refine the client's initial request for her services, so that she is providing accurate and complete answers for what the client is really worried about. So, before Donna can begin to uncover useful research conclusions for her client, she has to discover "the questions beneath the question."

The existence of "questions beneath the question" is particularly apparent in conversations with children. If a child's father has been away on a lengthy business trip, the question of "When is Daddy coming home?" actually relates to a series of questions beneath the question; anything from "Will Daddy read me a bedtime story tonight?" to "Do you think he bought me a present while he was away?" may actually be the real target of the child's query about the date of Daddy's home-coming. Once again, there are "questions beneath the question."

In this passage from Luke 21 about the end times, it seems to me that Jesus is actually providing answers to the disciples' "questions beneath the question." And key among those core questions must have been, "Lord, what kind of lives can we expect if we are to be your faithful followers?" And in his answers, Jesus tells them not to place their trust in mighty fortresses or imposing cities built by human hands, as these will surely fall. (See Lk.21:6,20) He warns his disciples about the many false Messiahs who will claim the title of divine leadership (See Lk.21:8), In fact, the Bible scholar Albert Barnes notes that in at least one account there have been a total of 24 people claiming to be the Messiah since the time of the Emperor Adrian.<sup>2</sup> Jesus tells the disciples that their ministry will also take place in the midst of war and revolution. (See Lk.21:9-10) The Christian Gospel, Christ adds, will be proclaimed during times of great natural catastrophes and against a backdrop of erratic, even violent changes in the natural order. (See Lk.21:11, 25) The disciples are also warned that their proclamation of the Word will bring them into contact with intense persecution, and perhaps torturous death. (See Lk.21:12-19; 23b-24)

But there are also words of great hope in this passage. Jesus assures us that the faithful will always be equipped to defend their faith against attack. (See Lk.21:15) He promises that our eternal spiritual being will remain unharmed. (See Lk.21:18) And there will come a day when Our Lord returns in great glory to the joyous ranks of the faithful. (See Lk.21:28)

Central to Luke 21 is the question of time. When Jesus speaks about end times in this chapter, is He talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 69-70 AD, or is he speaking about the end of the world as we know it? Debate continues on this point. But I believe Our Lord is answering the question beneath the question here, which is, "What kind of life can we expect as Christians in whatever time God has allotted us?" If we concentrate on this deeper question, we can readily see how this passage from Luke is linked to the causes of our lives. And the only conclusion possible is that no cause born of this world can be perfect, since all things created by man are blemished from their birth. Conversely, no cause championed by God can end in failure, since God is all sovereign and never failing.

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<sup>2</sup> Barnes 112-113, note 5.

To focus on when the world will be coming to an end is to lose the point of the Gospel. A focus on the end times takes us down tunnels and warrens to such an extent that we do indeed become just like the proverbial white rabbit, who was constantly complaining to Alice that “the hurrier I go the behinder I get.” Once we begin to worry about when the curtain is coming down on redemptive history, it’s just one short step to pick up the banner of desperate causes within this self-imposed time limit, such as who will be saved and who will not.

Lesslie Newbigin addresses this obsession in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* by pointing out that the desperate focus on personal salvation (of oneself and others) from impending doom has a tendency to become wantonly self-centered rather than joyously God-centered.<sup>3</sup> The real question beneath the question is not, “Who shall be saved?” Instead, the Christian focus must be, “How shall God’s name be hallowed, His Kingdom come, and His will be done on earth as in heaven with **whatever time I have left?**”<sup>4</sup> Or, to borrow on the wisdom of Father Timothy Kavanagh, “We all need to bloom where we’re planted!”<sup>5</sup> And how are we to bloom? What are we to do as we prepare for The Lord’s return? Well, one thing I believe we should all be doing much more of is, to dream, and to dream really, really big!

Is. 65:17-25 is God’s invitation for his children to dream. The Holy Mountain which Isaiah foretells in Chapter 65 is surely the blessed state of grace that God wants for all of his children. It is a description which goes far beyond anything the human eye has ever seen. And it stirs in the believer’s heart a deep yearning to play his or her part in the unfolding of this beautiful dream as it unfurls to its glorious culmination.<sup>6</sup> Yes, this passage is God’s invitation to his children to dream. And the fact is, real dreams about truth and beauty and love are never wasted. I remember some 53 years ago, there was a man who was not afraid to dream of these things. He dreamt that one day our land would rise up and live into the true meaning of its declarations. He dreamt of a day when all God’s people would strive against oppression and build their hopes on freedom and justice for all. He dreamed of a land where no child could be judged by the color of her skin or the shape of his eyes. This man dreamed of the day when every dark valley of the humble poor would be would be exalted, and every hill and mountain of the rich and powerful would be made low, so that the rough places of inequity and unfairness in our country might be made a fair and blessed plain of equal opportunity for all so that the glory of the Lord might truly be revealed.<sup>7</sup> It has been not quite 50 years since a bullet fired in Memphis ended the earthly pilgrimage of Martin Luther King. Oh, but his dream prospers and roles boldly on. Let us never, as children of God forget to dream!

There are times in life, crossroads in everyone’s life when we are called to defend one cause or another. This Veteran’s Day weekend we honor those who are willing to defend their cause even at the risk of their very lives. And there are, in this life, causes that **must** be defended, even at the peril of human life. But, when people become absolutely, totally committed to a cause, when someone becomes enthralled to a cause so that they can no longer stand back and see its blemishes, when people come to fall completely under the spell of a cause, that is when very bad things can happen to very good people. Because there is only one perfect cause that has ever been, only one cause that has no blemish. There is only one cause that ever was, only one that can never lead people to hate one another. Because it is the cause of perfect love, and it can never hate. This cause was not born of the world. You have to seek this cause, and sometimes you find it in strange places. And often, very often you have to wait on this cause. It is not a cause that speaks with a loud voice. It is not a cause that marches to the sound of stirring drums. It usually speaks softly, this cause into our hearts and ears, often in dark nights of great pain. But it is worth waiting for this cause. Because it is the cause which never dies, which never ceases to love us. It is the cause that will never fade, a champion who cannot fail us, and a Kingdom that shall never pass away. Blessed Veteran’s Day Weekend. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen JWB+ 11-10-16

<sup>3</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 168-169.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Signs amid the Rubble* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 71.

<sup>5</sup> This phrase appears at various points in Jan Karon’s Mitford Series, especially in *A New Song* (New York: Penguin/Putnam, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See footnote on Is. 65:17-25, English Standard Bible, Study Version (Crossway, 2008) p. 1359.

<sup>7</sup> These are some of the basic concepts from King’s “I have a dream!” speech before the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 2016.