

Advent 1, 2016  
The focal point that expands<sup>1</sup>  
Matthew 24:36-44

I went to the AGO this week to see the exhibit, *Mystical Landscapes*. There are some exceptional paintings in this exhibit by well-known artists and many who are lesser known but no less impressive. The works that I was drawn to the most are the ones that invited me into them, where the regular dimensions of our world, the separation between painted canvas and viewer recedes the longer one spends time contemplating them. One painting by Edvard Munch for example – a psychedelic sun - seems both to draw one in and to wash over one amazingly achieving both effects at the same time. There is also a Lauren Harris painting of a familiar Georgian bay scene of a wide path of smooth yet also grooved rock receding between birches drawing not only your eye but also if you let yourself, your whole being to a distant lake and even more distant shore. Long before moving pictures and even longer before 3D movies invite you to feel like part of the scene rather than merely an observer – these paintings were achieving something in my view even more remarkable as the artists attempted to capture and convey their experience of both the transcendent, that which is beyond our normal sight, and the imminent when the divine is closer to us than we are to ourselves. In the best of them edges of reality blur, the material world becomes fuzzy and it's possible to become more aware with the artist of a world beyond this one at the same time as it touches this one.

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Advent 1 is one of those moments in the church year where so many things conflate, or converge to one central point that it encourages us to become more sharply focused and more expanded at the same time.

It's a strange

time and space place

where the material world – only too real at times blurs and

paradoxically you are invited into something that is both more real and more promising at the same time.

Let's look at the Matthew passage together.

It's central point which focuses both this passage and this season of Advent is that The Son of Man is coming. Who is this Son of Man or this human one for whom we wait? This is where ideas converge.

The Son of Man language brings together an ancient Israel hope first mentioned in the apocalyptic vision of Daniel with the expected coming again of the person Jesus but placed in Jesus own apocalyptic vision of the future in the book of Matthew who is writing about and looking back on Jesus' life and seeing there in Jesus the realization of Jewish Christian hopes. There are lots of layers and convergences but ultimately

The human One for whom they were waiting and in whom we have put our own hope, is the one who is also

- the hope of the nations,
- the one who brings peace, according to Isaiah,
- and the one who according to Matthew is coming to judge the world

For Christians this human one has come, is coming and will come. If we completely focus on this central point that The Son of Man is coming our focus may eventually blur until we also know that Jesus was, is now, will be again and is at all times. How can this be? It is only possible to both believe and experience this if we begin to see things in new ways or in new realms.

The verses that are peripheral to this central point – but no less important are that while we wait in anticipation to know Jesus' presence with us again, we don't know the day or the hour of his coming and we need to stay awake and ready.

Unfortunately over the centuries a lot of baggage has collected around this passage.

The most obvious difficulty with this passage is the fact that two verses, the ones where one person is taken and one is left behind have spawned an entire theology of fear about our salvation and the possibility of Jesus' return.

and the fact that this theology has morphed into an entire "left behind" TV series – has in my view been highly unfortunate. Like an old painting that has collected centuries of oil and dust, we're going to need to be like those who practice art restoration to get back to what was really going on here.

What's really, real in these verses is that Matthew is writing to a Jewish Christian community who had just experienced Rome's crushing defeat of the Jewish revolt, CE 70, including the unimaginable destruction of a

temple whose stones were each taller than me and only two of them would have sat on this platform up here.

“Not one stone will be left on another,” Jesus’ followers remembered him saying.

And in that era of Roman occupation and oppression and destruction, as in the days of Noah (referring to the destructive flood) when they were eating and drinking and marrying – trying to carry on with life as normally as possible, it was not uncommon for Roman soldiers to take one from the field and leave another behind, or for the soldiers to take one from the grinding stone and leave another behind, such was the fear and the despair with which they had lived during the time of the revolt and maybe even when Matthew was writing this gospel.

Fear and despair were already well known. They didn’t need to hear that the Son of Man would cause these things. They already knew these things.

What they might instead have heard is that into the midst of their already watchful, wakeful and fearful hearts, when they feared the thief and enemy of the night, the Son of Man would come and judge this situation with righteousness – restoring for them both hope and peace.

One of the paintings at the AGO that I couldn’t walk away from even though it was deeply disturbing was hanging in the “dark night of the soul” part of the exhibit.

It was hanging with others that attempted to interpret in art the horrors of World War 1.

Even though it was a disturbing painting it had within it a crossroads with a small chapel. One path from this crossroads led off into the distance to a faintly lit horizon. While disturbing, this painting held out the possibility of hope.

Just as the passage in Matthew is disturbing as it described realities that we can't seem to escape in any century it still holds out the possibility of hope,

but we need to lift our eyes, and stay awake, and continue to peer into the horizon and maybe even beyond the horizon for the promised coming One -

The One like a human – who has revealed, who will reveal, who is always revealing the presence of God to us.

And this revelation can come to us where material world realities blur into the hope of something greater, into the hope of a horizon where there is light and where there will one day be peace.

All the layers of who Jesus is are present in Matthew.

In today's passage,

Jesus is the one who is coming,

In the next chapter in Matthew Jesus is the one who is always present in the naked, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned, and in the very last verse of Matthew Jesus is the One who promises to remain with us always even to the end of the age.

And so this is the One we also remember when we share the bread and wine as we will do in a few minutes

Like Advent 1, like Matthew's gospel, like a mystical painting, the bread and wine can be for us something that sharpens our focus and expands our experience of God.

May it be so.