

Let me say from the outset, I believe we should first and foremost admit that our Gospel passage will sound to most of us – quite frankly, (if we really listen to it) – as sheer fantasy.

Really. I mean, in this passage you have Jesus promising his disciples that there will come a time of great tribulation and difficulty and trial and testing and that during that time the son of Man will come in the clouds with great power and glory and his appearance will inaugurate the redemption of his followers.

And here's the thing – have you seen it, or for that matter anything remotely like it? Oh sure, trials and tribulation, the roaring of sea and wave; might feel like the evening news, especially this year after Hurricane Ida. But the coming on clouds in power and glory? Probably not. Except maybe in a movie, or a comic book, or a fairy tale, or a science fiction novel, ... or the Bible. Which is why I describe it as fantasy.

Notice, however, that I didn't say it's not true, but rather that it's fantasy – as in *fantastical*, beyond our experience, extraordinary, not of this world. And, I would argue, precisely because it is not of this world, because it is beyond our physical and material existence and experience, it has the power to redeem us. That is, I believe the Bible *not* because it tells me of things I have seen and know for myself but *precisely* because it describes a reality that stretches beyond the confines of my finite, mortal existence and therefore has the capacity to redeem me and you... and this life and world we share.

Near the beginning of his lengthy Christmas poem, *For the Time Being*, W.H. Auden pens the following confession: “Nothing can save us that is possible: We who must die demand a miracle.”

And there it is: when you are on the brink of death – from illness or failure or disappointment or heartbreak or calamity or oppression or depression or burnout or whatever – when you are on the brink of death you are keenly aware that you are insufficient, that this world and reality is temporary, and that you stand in desperate

need of the miraculous, of salvation, for that which is merely possible cannot save. And that is what the gospel offers – an impossible possibility, a reality that transcends the everyday real, a Truth deeper than all else we have been told is true, a story that stretches beyond and encompasses all our stories so as to give them meaning, integrity, and purpose.

Now some, I know, would call this an escape, a flight from reality and the specter of death. And, honestly, let's not fool ourselves: this is the great risk, the significant gamble of the Christian life. For the truth the gospel proclaims is not some mere fact that we can verify but rather is a claim, a confession, even a wager, that there is a Reality and Truth beyond the confines of our mortal, meager existence that we will not fully experience until the world as we know it passes away and then and only then will we see through the glass clearly and understand fully even as we are fully understood.

But it is a risk, make no mistake, one that we cannot calculate or estimate ahead of time but into which we throw ourselves, mind, body, and spirit simply because we not help it; because, that is, we have been taken captive to the Word of God

through our encounter with Scripture, through our shared experiences of the divine, drawn into this world of faith like C.S. Lewis' character Lucy going through the wardrobe and, having tasted the promises of God, cannot return. And so there it is: the gospel is true, *and* it is fantastic, otherworldly, beyond our experience.

Now, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure we get that. Or maybe we've just forgotten it – forgotten just how audacious, even how ridiculous the gospel is. How contrary it is to all of our reason and experience. No wonder Paul calls it foolishness – for it isn't simply good news, but rather news that is too good to be true. I mean, think about it. Week in and week out, we listen to the Biblical story that asserts not only that there is a God who has created and still sustains the vast cosmos, but that this God not only knows that you exist, but gives a darn, actually cares, deeply and passionately about you and your hopes and dreams, your successes and failures; this God cares enough to send God's only Son into the world to die that you might have life.

I mean, my goodness, but that message is, quite literally, in-credible, that is, not believable, because in the face of the evening news this news is simply too good to be true. Or maybe, just maybe, it's so good that it must be true. That's one the

be true. Or, maybe, just maybe, it's so good that it **must** be true. That was the opinion, anyway, of J.R.R. Tolkien, the Oxford English professor, devout Roman Catholic, and author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, who in an essay written half a century ago argued that the gospel story is not only the perfect fairy tale but is actually the root of all fantasy, because it tells the deeply true and ultimately joyful story of humanity – fallen *and* redeemed – in all of its horror, poignancy, and glory.

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Imagine that, if you will; that Lewis' Narnia and Tolkien's Middle-earth, Rowling's Hogwarts, and even Collins' Panem are all – some directly others less so, some intentionally others accidentally – reflections of the only deeply true and ultimately joyful story of wayward humanity and God's passionate, tenacious quest to redeem us through love.

And it's not just this passage from *Luke*, of course. For while *Luke* claims in this passage that Jesus will come again to redeem and to save, *Genesis* claims that God the father of Jesus created heaven and earth in the first place and placed humanity at the center of this world to tend and care for it and for each other, and both of these confessions are simultaneously incredible and true.

And it doesn't stop here:

After all, *Exodus* announces that God cares deeply about the way we treat each other — ridiculous, but true.

And the prophets promise God's comfort and mercy, even for those who have fled from God — unlikely, but true.

In Mary's song that we'll listen to in a couple of Sundays we hear that the day will come when the world is turned around so that all who are hungry and poor and in need will be satisfied – beyond our experience, but true.

And *Galatians* proclaims that in Christ there is no distinction between slave or free, male or female, that all are one in the unity of Christ – extraordinary, but true.

And *Colossians* declares that we are more than the sum of our past failures and shortcomings, that God has in fact nailed the record that stands against us to the cross — highly doubtful, but true.

And at the end of all this, *Revelation* promises that God will wipe every tear from our eyes and create a new heaven and earth and dwell with all of us in peace – again, sheer fantasy, but true!

Do you begin to see what I mean? From beginning to end the whole Bible makes extraordinary, otherworldly claims and promises about God that are simultaneously too good to be true and so good that when we hear them we just can't help but *believe* they're true, even *know* they're true and live our life accordingly. So let's face it: this week's Gospel passage is peculiar and hard and odd and wonderful because it announces to us a promise that itself is peculiar and hard and odd and wonderful, a promise, that is, well, that is big enough to save us.

For that let us thank God and pray: Holy, awesome, mighty, and merciful God, we give You thanks for the great gift of love known in, through, and as Jesus the Christ, Your beloved Son who is our Lord and Savior. We pray this day that as incredible as His words are to us about His return to earth, our trust and certain belief will be steadfast; that our waiting on Your promises of salvation, of forgiveness, of eternal life will be rewarded — in our lifetime or the next; that the signs of His return will not put us off, but will point us to You and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, by whose power we are able to make this prayer and continue in Your service. Amen