

## the son of man coming in clouds

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Isaiah 64; Mark 13:24-37  
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### The Son of Man Coming in Clouds

Jesus said, "In those days, after the suffering, the sun  
Will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,  
And the stars will be falling from heaven...  
Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds  
With great power and glory. And he will send out the angels  
And gather his elect from the ends of the earth.

What a text! What are we to do with it? All that talk of the sun going dark, the moon losing its light, the stars falling, the Son of Man — do we even know who that is — some heavenly figure coming in clouds. Hard to take in. Maybe, once, it wasn't hard for people of faith to fill the universe with images of a heavenly figure, high up in the sky, coming down to us in clouds, but it is no longer so for us, and has not been so for a long time. It can even be hard for us to feel the assurances that are provided here: that God will gather all his elect from the ends of the earth. The physical sciences, with their heavy, evidenced based, cosmological and evolutionary picture of the universe, do not, in themselves, destroy the profound meaning of our faith, but they question some of our most essential images and stories, telling us that if we take them literally, as if they were factual events, then we are falling into illusions. But there is a corollary to this talk about the illusions of faith, one that we forget at our peril, even amidst our faith struggles, and that is this: if we are ever tempted towards secularity, towards unbelief, which is so common these days, towards thinking that modern science alone leads us towards an understanding of the mysteries of creation, the mystery of existence, the mystery of being itself, the mystery of why there is something and not nothing, so that we think we need to move on, to give up our faith, then we will have fallen into another kind of misunderstanding, another type of illusion, a spiritually devastating one, one that can lead to our inner dissolution; for science, in itself, is helpless towards finding either meaning or purpose in the creation of the universe or in the evolutionary development of earthly life.

So, today, we people of faith, we find ourselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place. The rock is that so many of our traditional statements of faith, and so many biblical stories, cannot be taken literally, whether we are talking about Christ sitting at the right hand of God, or that we are saved by Christ's blood, or the biblical creation story, the Adam and Eve story, the flood story, let alone a host of stories, images and statements we find in the gospels, so many of which cannot be taken as if they were factual. That's the rock on our right. The hard place is on our left. For if we abandon our faith and go only with the truths that the sciences reveal to us, then we are left, as the French philosopher, Albert Camus, told us decades ago, (that we are left) with an impossibly heart wrenching absurdity: that, precisely because we are human beings, because we have an inner life, a soul, we cannot live without purpose, without meaning, we cannot live without longing for goodness, truth, beauty, love, so that we find ourselves, futilely, necessarily, absurdly, as Camus says, (absurdly) compelled to seek meaning and purpose in a world where, objectively, scientifically, meaning cannot be found. To be a person of faith, then, and to be also a person with a twenty-first century consciousness of reality, is to find ourselves sailing, redemptively, healingly, sailing between this rock and this hard place. It's a miracle isn't it? How do we do it? What a good question. I've been asking myself that question again and again all my life.

For comfort when I ask myself this question, I think of something Luther said when his papal inquisitors asked him where he would stand if he was thrown out of the church. "Under the sky," Luther reportedly responded, "Under the sky." I don't quite know what Luther meant by that response, but I have a feel for that expression, for being a person of Christian faith, who has Experienced Christ's risen presence in my life, and yet finding myself having to reinterpret traditional beliefs, as if I was being thrown, not out of the church, not out of faith, but thrown out of the tradition ... and it feels like standing "under the sky."

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For to know that so much of our religious language, so many of our biblical stories, are not to be taken literally, is like standing under the sky. For it is to know that our language expressing our faith, our hope, is loose language, necessarily loose, loose precisely because we are using finite, temporal language as a medium to point to what is ultimate, to what is eternal, in life. It is like a finger pointing to the moon; the reality is not the finger. I've got another imaginative image in my head of what religious language is like, I think I got it from, the philosopher, Santayana, but maybe it was William James, I can't remember whom, but the image is of a lasso, that religious language is like a lasso that we toss up into the air, out it goes, flying away from us, landing we hope, how we hope, landing onto the horn, even if not firmly, landing onto the horn of what is ultimately significant: the horn of eternal goodness, the horn of eternal truth, of eternal beauty, of eternal love, the horn of the very ground of being itself, the horn of that eternal reality we call God.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, scientific knowledge is a good; it can and does correct our illusions: it certainly informs us of the workings of the reality we call nature, but science does not, cannot, touch our longing, our spiritual longing, for goodness, truth, love, for meaning and purpose; for our sense, our revealed sense, that we would not have these spiritual longings were they not lodged in the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the transcendent depth of life itself, being itself, in the ground of all that is, in God. For we people of faith do not find our refuge in science but in the spirit, in our spiritual life, and we can be content to live with loose language, for such language can awaken us, can stretch our apprehension towards what is ultimate in life: it is not for nothing that Jesus tell us, over and over again, stay awake, stay awake. For surely, the language, the picture of a Son of Man coming in clouds with power and glory, that's pretty awakening language. It's also very loose language; hard to imagine language much looser. But its very looseness, its fantastic imagery, awakens us; and once we give up the notion that Jesus is talking to us literally, once we give up the notion that Jesus is telling us about some coming, historical event, then its clear enough that this fantastic imagery is stretching our apprehension towards an ultimate hope. But what can we know of that hope? When I ask myself this question, I think of those lines from T.S. Eliot's poem that I read at the church's poetry night a couple of weeks ago. Some of you may recall them, for they were striking words. Here they are: "Wait without hope," Eliot writes, "Wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing." Eliot is not telling us we are not to hope, for his final lines in this grand poem declare, "All shall be well, all manner of things shall be well." He is telling us that we do not know, cannot know, the specifics of our hope, that if we think we know them, then we are hoping for the wrong thing. What we can know, what we can wait for, live for, is what Christ expresses for us in painting the fantastic picture of a Son of Man coming in clouds with power and glory. For that picture, which we think of as the return of Christ, expresses the final supremacy of God's love and goodness over all the the dark, destructive forces of evil that defy God in God's good creation. What a great hope that is, what a magnificent hope, a hope that can sustain us even amidst the sometimes terrible suffering that might befall us, even amidst the cruelties, the evils that we human beings all too often inflict upon each other, a hope that allows us to continue to affirm the goodness of life, a hope that allows us to continue to live for the good. We may not know how it can be, or what it can be, "that in the end, "all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well," except that it shall be by the grace and power of our compassionate, merciful God of Jesus Christ our Lord. We live by that faith, our great redemptive, healing faith, a faith we give thanks for, for we have it by the grace of God. So, sisters and brothers in Christ, let us give thanks.

Thanks be to God; thanks be to Christ. Amen.