



ON YOUR TOES

November 27, 2016, First Sunday in Advent

Matthew 24: 36-44

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Open our imaginations to your word, O Lord, however jolting it be. May it wake us from the temptation to drift off and become inattentive to all the ways You are present to us in the here and now. May your word startle us, O God, and keep us on our toes. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

I'm not going to preach a sermon this morning, not *exactly* a sermon. I'm going to share a re-written version of a chapter in a novel I wrote some 25 years ago. You need just a bit of background before you sit back and hear the story. The narrator is the fictitious pastor of a tiny church in a little town in southwestern Minnesota. He's not from there; he grew up in a string of generic middle-class American suburbs only to find himself called to serve as a minister in a struggling small town out on the prairie. The story is set on the Sunday after Thanksgiving...

About half the folks in my church are farmers, it begins, and this year they had to look hard to see what they might be thankful for on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Some folks said they didn't come to church because they were tired or feeling a bit peaked. But in truth they didn't come to church because they were angry – angry at the worry, angry at the endless work, angry at the hail and the snow that came too soon, wreaking havoc on their harvest. Deep down, they're sometimes angry at God.

Early the week of Thanksgiving, I resigned myself to writing a sermon on the awkward assigned lectionary Gospel reading for the Sunday after Thanksgiving,



also the first Sunday in Advent. The reading, from Matthew's Gospel, is what they called in seminary apocalyptic – those wild-eyed operatic sketches of the end of the world, images of the terminal nature of existence – both the end of history and of the end of me personally. These passages are not, of course, the most winsome corners of the Bible. I wondered what in the world I was going to say to my beleaguered little congregation of dead-broke farmers and struggling small businessmen come the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

But the sermon never got written, much less preached. Early in the week, I was struck down with the flu – fever, shakes, a splitting headache and every preacher's dread plague – laryngitis. It was as though Divine Wisdom had foreknowledge of what I might say come Sunday and decided to strike me dumb.

For a solo minister, there was only one thing to do, and that was to call in the only spare minister in a radius of fifty miles who'd climb into the pulpit on short notice – the Reverend Reginald Ardent. Reg is a retired fundamentalist preacher who'd spent most of his career as an itinerant evangelist working the tent-meeting circuit they used to call the "Sawdust Trail." He belongs to a tiny denomination called the "Apostolic Church of the Divine Christ of God," which broke off from another denomination whose name includes all those same words arranged in a different sequence.

I knew Reg through the local clergy association after he moved to town in retirement to be near his son. His theology has been shaped by the more strident of the Old Testament prophets and their thunderings against vice in general and sins of the flesh in particular. From that hard-edged corner of Scripture, Reg's theology does a graceless leap over love and grace to land in those bits of wild and wooly, end-of-the-world apocalyptic in the New Testament.

Reg actually only preaches one sermon. He got away with this over his 45 years on the Sawdust Trail by constantly moving from one town to the next. His lone sermon is about the Rapture, that esoteric doctrine that says at the Second Coming of Christ, all true followers will be plucked whole from wherever they happened to be at that unexpected moment and whisked upward into the Heaven. On the rear



bumper of Reg's rusty old Buick LeSabre is a bumper sticker that says it all – *“in case of rapture, driver will disappear.”*

In his sermon, Reg paints verbal pictures of people gathered in various places from which one of them suddenly just disappears. People are waiting in line at the supermarket and all of a sudden the checkout girl is gone – the Rapture! Kids are sitting in school and without a hint of warning, a seventh grader in the second row vanishes – the Rapture! Folks are shopping at Wal-Mart and suddenly a guy standing in the auto parts line is gone, leaving behind two new tires he'll not be needing – the Rapture! Then, in darker tones sharpened over the years to a sinister edge, Reg describes a church service – worshippers gathered on a Sunday and only *one* of them is raptured, hinting that the raptured one might *not* be the minister. In this school of preaching, he is a master. Reg launches his sermon slowly and gradually climbs into a sermonic frenzy, all designed to scare the bejabbers out of his listeners, most of who on brief self-examination, count themselves among *“Those Left Behind”* as he names them.

When Reg preached his stock sermon to my congregation the Sunday after Thanksgiving, I was there – too ill and mute to preach myself, but no longer sick enough for bed. Frankly, I was also curious to see how he would work his sermon around Thanksgiving. Of course, he was very pleased with the lectionary Gospel text from Matthew 24, the meatiest end-of-the-world Rapture passage in the whole Bible.

The day found Reg in fine form. He wandered out of the pulpit, waved his hands about and pointed theatrically at the ceiling. After all these years of peaching the same sermon, he has no need of notes. He worked slowly into his crescendo, painting pictures of lukewarm, one-Sunday-a-month Christians with woebegone looks on their faces as the few and true were swept up to heaven in the Rapture. All this was novelty to a politely attentive congregation of Presbyterians. Reg wrapped it up by slicing the air with his fingers, closing his eyes, and fairly shouting, *“Thank God, thank God, in the season of Thanksgiving, thank God that it's not too late for anyone here today.”*



He sat down, utterly exhausted. This was work for a younger man! Sweat was pouring down his temples. He mopped his brow with a handkerchief. He closed his eyes, threw back his head and stretched out his legs in front of him. Reg had told me that he liked the sermon to be at the end of the service, followed only by a closing hymn. I watched as he fairly struggled to his feet to sing it. He'd selected it; we'd never sung it before so most of the sound was coming from the choir.

"Come Lord, Tarry Not," it goes, *"Bring the longed-for day; O why these years of waiting here; These ages of delay."*

Our choir, eight ladies and one gentleman, recesses out of the church during the closing hymn. The church has no center aisle, and no narthex. If they went out one of the side aisles they'd find themselves marching out the front doors into 20-degree weather. So they leave the choir loft, which is up front on the left, march across the back of the chancel behind the communion table and out the right rear door into the Fellowship Room and straight to the coffee urn.

This is a direct but narrow path with but one hazard – a wooden heating grate in the floor right behind the big oak communion table. The grate measure about two feet square. It's made of pine and is simply set unfastened into the hole in the floor that leads to the heating duct below. That duct then bends at a right angle about two feet down before continuing on to the old hot-air furnace.

Emma Bowers, a soprano, is new to the choir. She's a petit older woman who gives herself another three inches by wearing stiletto high-heeled shoes. As she passed over the heating grate, her right heel went into one of the little square holes and lodged tight. The processing choir, hymnals in from of their noses, slowed as Emma tugged to free her foot. The shoes were old and snug. Her right shoe, the one stuck in the grate, somehow stayed on; and the heel didn't break off. On her third a mightiest pull, Emma managed to lift the entire grate right out of the duct. And she pressed on dragging it behind her, limping as though she'd been shot in the leg and was trying not to notice.

Right behind her in the single-file choir lineup was Elsie Johnson, who – to put it kindly – doesn't have a keen awareness of her immediate environment. She can



see alright, but just doesn't seem to notice things. I turned to see if Reg noticed Emma plowing along, dragging the grate stuck to her shoe. He hadn't, but he looked up just in time to watch as Elsie Johnson, next in line, stepped to the hole where the grate wasn't. Elsie let out a little squealing "*Whoop!*" and simply disappeared from sight behind the communion table.

Reg saw it happen. He dropped his jaw in a flabbergasted gape. His eyes went wide; his hymnal slipped from his hand; he shut his eyes tight. THE RAPTURE! Still in the grip of his sermonic high, he saw before his eyes the very scene he had been painting in 45 years of sermons. Elsie had been raptured... And he had been left behind. This state of flabbergasted misapprehension lasted perhaps four seconds. It was doubtless the longest four seconds in Reginald Ardent's life.

Finally his look shifted from horror to immense relief. He saw that Elsie had not been raptured, only slid three feet into a heating duct. And he was not left behind. The apocalypse was delayed. Elsie had only gone down three feet to where the duct turns. There wasn't a scratch on her and to this day, she not clear as to what happened.

I went home exhausted, ate a whole bag of potato chips and went to bed. I woke at eight that night, feeling better. The worst of the flu had passed and my mental picture of those four long seconds in Reg's life were becoming a perverse pleasure. I took a shower and put on a bathrobe and looked in the mirror.

I imagined *myself* vanishing into the floor with a sudden "*Whoop!*" I thought of all the dear hearts who have vanished from this earthly life just as suddenly – my grandparents, some uncles, too many church members whom I had come to love, a friend from seminary too young to die.

As I looked at myself, starting to gray and getting lumpy, I whispered to the mirror, "*You might have never been. You did nothing to deserve life. You have no right to be, but here you are.*" I went into to kiss our seven-year-old son goodnight. He was only half asleep and pulled me down beside him into the bed as



he fell into child sleep. I could hear his breathing and feel his heart beating, his chest pulled tight against my side. He might have never been, but he is.

Lying there, a whisper of Gospel truth fell in place: It's all a gift, all a gift; and it's all so fragile, it's all so consummately delicate. It could be gone in a "Whoop." A line from Scripture dropped into my head: *"This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."* I whispered to myself and to my sleeping child, *"You must be relentlessly attentive to the moment; you have to watch so closely for every blessing lodged in the now. It's right here, right now, close by. You have to watch for it, watch for it on your tippy toes, or you might miss it."*

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