

Anticipation (1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

November 22, 2000

In his book *Abel's Island* William Steig tells the story of a mouse (Abel) who is marooned on an island for an entire year. In the first part of the book, Abel is all alone on the island. Unlike the participants in the *Survivor* TV series, he has no one around to help him survive—or to vote him off the island and thereby return him to his home.

All during fall and winter, Abel is lonesome. Then, on a spring day, Gower Glackens appears. Gower is a huge bullfrog who is swept along by powerful currents in the water and deposited on Abel's island. At first Abel is overjoyed to have a companion, but soon he discovers that Gower has a maddening habit of regularly drifting off into a trance. During these times Abel must patiently wait for Gower to "wake up."

When I preach to a congregation about the second coming, or as Paul says, "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints," I often feel that I am Abel trying to communicate with Gower Glackens. As I begin to explore this topic, I find most of my listeners experiencing a grand case of MEGO ("My Eyes Glaze Over"). Most of us can gear up for another round of Christmas festivities in honor of the "first coming." But when we raise the topic of Jesus's second coming, we find ourselves looking into unblinking, glazed-over Gower eyes. When this happens, it's hard to be as patient as Abel was.

A few years ago, I discovered a song that helps me during this time of the year—Carly Simon's "Anticipation." It begins: "We can never know about the days to come, but we think about them in many ways." That crystallizes the dilemma of this Sunday. Indeed, we don't know much about what God has in store for the world in the days to come, but as faithful people, we are invited by Jeremiah, Paul and Jesus to think about those days. Then, when our thinking is done, the psalmist invites us to pray about those days, lifting our total selves to God and asking God to deal with us out of steadfast love. That's where we should end—in prayer and self-offering—but we still have to do some thinking before we get there.

As I think with anticipation, I try to prevent myself from drifting into the traps that millennialists have encountered. One trap is the “Jesus and the fig tree story.” Some modern apocalyptists go through a variety of steps, beginning with the fig tree as a symbol of Israel and ending with 1948 as a key date—the establishment of the state of Israel. They then convince themselves that they are in the final days. But as Jesus and Carly Simon remind us, we can never clearly know about the days to come.

A cartoon published after the world did *not* end in September 1988 shows a bookstore owner replacing a sign that says, “The book that proves Christ will return in September 1988” with a new one that says, “The book that proves Christ will return retroactive to September 1988.”

What we do know is that we have been given a foretaste of the righteousness and justice promised by Jeremiah and that we have some experience of the holiness and abounding love described by Paul. These experiences give us a sneak preview of the days to come. According to the word, God is preparing a future of justice, freedom, reconciliation and wholeness. As we wait and prepare for those days, we are to imagine this new age. We are invited to think with anticipation, pray with confidence, and work with commitment for that future.

It is encouraging to read Walter Wink’s book *Engaging the Powers*, in which he talks about the “exponential increase in the use of nonviolence in just the last few years.” Whenever there is a display of true “people power,” we are getting a glimpse of the future God has in store for us. It may take the eyes of faith to see this against a backdrop of monumental violence and human cruelty, but it is there.

As nonviolent ways of resisting evil spread and as nonoppressive ways of governing increase, we can “stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.” When violence and oppression make it difficult to see this, we must resist the temptation to go into a trance or let our eyes glaze over. Instead, let’s join the psalmist and lift ourselves to God. Even if we feel deserted and alone on an island, wondering if we will make it, we can put our ultimate trust in God and God’s future.