

Living In Between  
Isaiah 2:1-5 and Romans 13:11-14  
First Presbyterian Church  
November 27, 2016  
Rev. Glen Bell

Last weekend the two top-grossing films in the United States were *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *Dr. Strange*. Together they earned over \$ 90 million from movie goers eager to encounter the surprising and unexpected, a whole new world beneath the surface level of reality.

Both films reward the vivid imagination of the audience. Both invite us to see and hear in new ways. Dr. Stephen Strange, a gifted neurosurgeon, is caught up in the daily challenges of intricate surgery, until a tragic accident intervenes. Only through frustration and questioning does he discover the promise of a new creation. *Fantastic Beasts*, much like *Harry Potter*, presents the parallel reality of magic and astonishing creatures, right there alongside our ordinary world, but impossible for many of us to see.

These two movies, as one reviewer notes, are “imagination-tickling fantasy adventures.” In the midst of the fun, they invite you and me to look and listen, to uncover a new level of awareness.

So it is in today’s scriptures. Noel Leo Erskine, of the Candler School of Theology, writes, “There is a ‘seeing beyond seeing’ here, learning to recognize reality at its depth, as we learn ‘there is more here than meets the eye.’”

Both Isaiah and Romans point to end of our human story, when Christ shall return and all peoples shall recognize God’s power and goodness. The Lord’s light will judge the actions and intentions of our hearts. No longer will our story be filled with racism and discrimination, warfare and famine, quarreling and jealousy. Instead, all will walk in the light of the Lord.

We glimpse this new heaven and new earth in Philippians, when Paul describes the final fulfillment of salvation, “God exalted Jesus and gave him the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

So on this first Sunday of Advent, the fitting instrument is a trumpet, for God’s promises announce the imagination-tickling adventure of what lies ahead for us. Swords become plowshares and spears pruning hooks. God’s dwelling and purposes are revealed as highest and best. All people recognize the mercy and majesty of Jesus Christ.

But there’s one big problem. We’re Muggles, you and I. In the words of *Fantastic Beasts*, we are No-Maj. We don’t see or feel the magic. Truth be told, we don’t expect it either. We expect famine soon in South Sudan, more killing and tragedy in Aleppo and Syria. We think ISIS will keep beheading people. We worry what kind of white power and xenophobic nationalism will reveal itself next.

My friend Jennifer Singer will be ordained as a Jewish rabbi in two more months. A few days ago she shared that during the two weeks since the election, 700 anti-Semitic attacks have been reported across the country. That equals the number during the last two years. I wonder about the world in which she be leading a Jewish congregation.

Last week I happened to sit near a Muslim woman in the Panera Bread. She was wearing a headscarf, a hijab. I spoke to her with a simple Arabic blessing, *assalaam alaykum*, “Peace be

with you,” and then wished her a happy Thanksgiving. I wonder how many times each week she gets stares or rude comments simply for practicing her faith.

At our worst, that’s what you and I expect. At our very worst, we make ourselves comfortable with the way things are. We don’t worry too much about the vulnerable, the hungry, the different. We don’t think about the homeless veteran who headed to AA on Thanksgiving Day, trying to make it clean and sober one day at a time through the holiday weekend. We try to shield ourselves from all of it.

But Isaiah brings us up short. The Day of the Lord is coming, he proclaims, so let us walk in the light of the Lord! Paul says the same: Wake up, and put on the light, put on the armor of God! The night is far gone and the day is coming quickly.

I believe God wants two things from us this Advent season. The first is simple, yet difficult. “Sleepers, wake! Rise from the dead! Christ will shine on you.”

You and I are invited to wake up, to put aside the self-centeredness in which we live and to put on Jesus Christ. Generosity and forgiveness and concern for others must no longer be only good ideas, but our daily discipline and opportunity.

It is a bit too easy, I think, for us to check off each of the categories we hear proclaimed in Romans 13 this morning. Stop your reveling and drunkenness, we hear. So we commend ourselves that we don’t party till all hours. Stop your debauchery and licentiousness, we hear. We commend ourselves for being faithful to our spouse. Stop your quarreling and jealousy, we hear. We pat ourselves on the back because we’re not fussy most of the time.

But what about our inclination to step back from the evils of our world and ignore the challenges in our neighborhoods? What about our blind spots? What about our temptation to just write a check instead of writing a check and getting involved? Or our habit of hoping for the best instead of lifting a finger?

Cindy Rigby, our Faith Focus Weekend speaker a year and a half ago, recently wrote, “Changes for the better are promised and are under way. We have reason to hope, even in the face of disappointments and suffering, even though we might look foolish for doing so. Our reason is our conviction that God is faithful and will see us through.

“Our role is not to wait, at least not in any passive sense, for God to craft the new heavens and the new earth. It is to jump right into the work God is doing in this world; to discern what God is saying, and to participate in this hope.”

Sisters and brothers, we are invited to jump right in to a full involvement in God’s world.

Our new sanctuary and courtyards and classrooms can never simply be places of refuge, but rather a mission outpost from which we are sent to proclaim and serve Jesus in the world.

You see, the most important moment of a worship experience is never the sermon or the music, never the moment when we feel most deeply touched or excited, not the mountaintop “wow”. The most important moment is when we walk out those doors, determined to make a difference in Christ’s name. The most important moment is up to us.

We can hear this is all the powerful verbs throughout this Romans passage: Wake up! Lay aside your mistakes and poor choices. Put on the armor of light. Renounce drunkenness and promiscuity and fussing and fighting. Clothe yourselves with Jesus, and live as Christ directs each day.

What a difference you will make, this week, this month!

Joanna Adams is a Presbyterian pastor in Atlanta. She writes, “I cannot imagine any worse news than to be told that it does not matter what I do, what choices I make, how I treat people. [But] few people act as if character matters. People justify to themselves the most outrageous

behavior and callous disregard for the well-being of others. Why? Because they do not believe any longer than something is expected of them.”

She shares this story: “A few years ago, a member of my congregation wrote a meditation for the annual Advent devotional booklet. ‘When I was an elementary school principal,’ he wrote, ‘I often walked the halls and visited the classrooms. One day, outside one of the first grade rooms sat a troubled little boy. He had clearly been sent to the hallway by an irate teacher. As the child saw me approaching, it was obvious he was really working hard at figuring out what to say.

‘Before I could speak, the child stood up and hugged me around the waist and said, “Mr. Jones, I love you.” I was disarmed but recovered sufficiently to tell the boy that good behavior was expected. I asked him to return to the classroom and apologize to the teacher. My expression of love was to guide him into accepting responsibility.

‘The child settled down and had a good year. Each time he saw me in the cafeteria or on my rounds, he would smile and wave, and say, “Thank you, Mr. Jones.”’

What do you and I need to do? We need to wake up, and make our best choices out in the world. We need to walk in the light, to reflect the love and justice of Jesus. When we see discrimination, we must stand against it. When we recognize racism, we cannot keep quiet or back away. When we come face-to-face with evil, we must stand up.

We do all these things, knowing that we will be misunderstood, knowing that others won’t get what we are doing or why. You see, that’s the problem with Advent. We know that Jesus is coming again, that the night is far gone and the day is near. But others are not yet in on the secret. That’s the problem: because we know the promise, we are no longer Muggles, no longer No-Maj.

Most of the rest of the world doesn’t get it. They think that a sword and a spear will always be a weapon, that darkness will always creep and worm its way inside us.

You and I must be strong. We must be willing to be misunderstood, like Dr. Strange or the heroes in *Fantastic Beasts*. We must be willing to stand up for hungry families or disabled veterans, even when others wonder why we are speaking out. We must be willing to name discrimination and racism and hate crimes for what they are, even when our neighbors wonder why we don’t just sit back and enjoy the privilege of being white and fairly well-to-do.

Jesus wasn’t able to come down from the cross before his death. The crowds didn’t “get” the meaning and purpose of his life until he was dead and resurrected. It may be that way for us too. It doesn’t matter truly. It doesn’t matter because of the second thing, the second and last thing God wants from us.

This Advent, as we wake, as we live and speak and serve Jesus with determination and zeal, there is one last thing we can do.

We can trust. We can rest in the promises of God.

Even in this crazy and broken world, one day God’s promises will be fulfilled. You and I will see God face to face. Through the wounds our world has inflicted upon itself, through the wounds you and I have endured, even through the wounds we have inflicted on others, God will show up.

Jesus will come again. Darkness will never triumph.

So take heart and rejoice. Walk in the light of the Lord.