

## **Rear View Mirrors**

### **Psalm 121, Matthew 8: 18-22**

Singer/songwriter Mac Davis wrote and sang a song with the lyrics, “Happiness was Lubbock, Texas in my rearview mirror.” Comedians around the country immediately agreed, but I took it personally. My parents were living in the small town of Abernathy, TX, 13 miles north of Lubbock, when it came time for me to discover America, which I did in West Texas Hospital in Lubbock. Three days later they took me home. I have had Lubbock, Texas in my rearview mirror ever since I was three days old.

Because Mac Davis was both born and raised there, he didn’t leave Lubbock until he had a driver’s license. Lubbock, though, was my natal town, not my hometown. Born there, but never lived there, I was in the running for the prize, if there was one, to be the youngest person ever to have Lubbock, TX in the rearview mirror, maybe even win free tickets to the Buddy Holly Center, but no. There was no such prize. Still, I was glad to get the news that I’ve been happy ever since I was three days old. Otherwise, I would think of myself as a grumpy old man.

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We all of us have a rearview mirror to our lives, filled with all sorts of experiences and people. Peter Marty, editor of Christian Century Magazine, a couple of years ago noticed that numerous people in his life were, in effect, trying to navigate their way into the future by looking in their rearview mirrors. So, he

performed a measurement. The rearview mirror of his car is 9” by 2”, while the windshield is 3’ by 5’, about 100 times larger than the mirror. We obviously miss out on a lot of the life that God is sending our way when we navigate by the rearview mirror.

An example. Rick and Meredith have grown apart in their marriage ever since their 26-year-old daughter died from complications of sepsis six years ago. Their daughter’s death is in both of their rearview mirrors. Meredith, though, is pleasant, happy, and seemingly fulfilled. After her daughter’s death, she went to a grief therapist who helped her realize that, even though she glances backward daily at Katie, there is no better way to honor her daughter than to stay focused on the newness of life coming her way in the windshield.

Rick, however, refuses to get help. He is so focused upon his daughter’s death in the rearview mirror that it all but paralyzes his present. He sits at home depressed, slowly worsening in health. How great it possibly could be if he paid attention to our psalm today, “I lift my eyes to the hills – from whence will my help come? From the Lord.” But Rick won’t look up. A crash in this marriage seems imminent.

People too often chart a course into the future by focusing too much on what they have experienced in the past. There are lyrics in Bette Middler’s song “The Rose” to this effect. “It’s the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance. It’s

the dream afraid of waking that never takes a chance. It's the one who won't be taken who cannot seem to give. And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live." Because of prior disappointments and painful experiences, we may fear that the opportunities coming up in the windshield won't work out and thus steer away.

And it's not that we should never look. How can history and experience inform us if we ignore or misunderstand our past? It's that sometimes our history and experiences can lead us astray. In today's reading, a scribe says, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go," to which Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

That is one strange answer unless Jesus means something like, "You don't understand. I'm not like the other rabbis in your rearview mirror, those who live and teach in a specific town and have living quarters for their disciples. You don't come to me so much as you go with me. No telling where I'll be tonight or tomorrow night. There are people out there I need to teach and heal. I'm on the go, and you have no experience with my lifestyle. Think you can handle it?"

And then another would-be-disciple, says to him, "I'll follow you, but Lord, first let me go and bury my father." To which Jesus answers, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Now, this statement is not as cold as it sounds. It does not mean that Jesus is anti-funeral or lacks compassion. Who is more compassionate than Jesus? Whose name is always brought up at Christian funerals

and memorial services? Plus, this fellow's father is alive and well and dancing "Hava Nagila" at his neighbor's wedding. Biblical scholars tell us that a person in those days would say, "I must first bury my father," to mean that before I can commit to anything else, I'm obligated to take care of family. I'll take over the family business when dad gets in poor health, sell it to my cousin when he dies, and then I'll come follow you. Next year in Jerusalem.

Jesus was an itinerant teacher/healer. Bethlehem and Nazareth may have been in his rearview mirror, but he had good news to deliver. He was moving on. So, in our Matthew reading, in the first instance he makes sure that a fellow, who has discipleship as other rabbis offered it in his rearview mirror, knows what he's in for. Jesus does not have an academy or a dormitory or serve continental breakfast to his disciples. And in the other instance Jesus tells a would-be disciple, who has the traditional way of family life in his rearview mirror, that he doesn't observe just any tradition. I'm leaving. Are you coming?

We may be our own worst enemies when it comes to losing out on life by keeping our eyes on the rearview mirror. This is a really big metaphor. I'll leave it to you to figure out in how many ways focusing on the past might prevent you from fully participating in the present. What I want to do today is call your attention to one category of "eyes on the rearview mirror" that is not working for us at all. And that is, assuming that things that seem to be set in stone, fixed,

permanent, will never change in the future. We obviously go into the future making decisions based upon the way things are and have always been. And most often this seems to work, but no longer does it work with the weather.

We presently have in the windshield weather of “biblical proportions.” Daily somewhere on the planet there is incredible drought, famine, flood, hurricane, heat, or wildfire. Just because it doesn’t happen here doesn’t mean it’s not happening elsewhere. And how are we to understand such weather? Well, if we look in the rearview mirror, we may remember hotter summers and then cooler summers, colder winters then milder, rainier seasons and dryer seasons. No need for concern. We’re just experiencing the usual fluctuations. But Christianity has a better way of understanding the weather than one’s limited experience.

Roland Frye reminds us in his excellent essay, “The Two Books of God,” that there have always been available to Christians not just one book of God, but two: the book of God’s Word in Scripture, which concerns the ultimate nature and destiny of humanity, and the book of God’s Works in Nature, which contains the created order. Saint Augustine, 354-430CE, who expounded so profoundly upon God’s Word in scripture, also referred to the second book, “the great book of created things. Look above you; look below you; read it, note it.”

John Calvin, 1509-1564CE, referred to the “duplex cognitio,” or twofold knowledge of God, scripture and nature. Pope Pius XII in 1939, “We learn from

two books: the universe for the human study of things created by God; and the Bible, for the study of God's superior will and truth."

And with regard to our two books, theologians, priests, pastors, biblical scholars, etc. are the authorities on the Bible, scientists the authorities when it comes to nature. John Calvin wrote, "The purpose of the biblical account of creation was not to instruct people in astronomy or in any other science, but rather in their human nature and destiny, and in their relation to God." Furthermore, when someone said to him that people schooled in science are not always believers, Calvin replied, "If the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance." Or as a high school girl in a church youth group said when speaking about climate change, "God gave us scientists to tell us how the world works."

In fact, among those scientists are those who do nothing but study the climate and whose findings are peer reviewed. Their reputations are staked upon the accuracy of their findings and pronouncements. And of this group of published climate scientists, 99% say that climate change is real, and that humans cause it largely by burning fossil fuels, but also by some of our other habits. And to respond to the findings and guidance of climate scientists is the historical Christian approach to the recent weather, which is only going to be getting worse.

This past August 4<sup>th</sup>, the thermometer crept all the way up to 115 degrees in Phoenix. A former resident who had moved to Oregon, 34-year-old Jessica Lindstrom, had returned to Phoenix to celebrate a baptism. Happy to be home in the desert, Jessica decided to take some time for herself. She had a busy life in Oregon as a mom and a nurse. And she knew how people in Phoenix joked that any temperature below the teens was comfortable, which it still was as she was as she left on a short hike in the Deems Hills Recreation area at 8:30a.m. When she didn't return by 10:00a.m, family went to check on her. By 11:30 the Phoenix Police and fire department joined in. At six o'clock in the evening her body was found lying between a large rock and a paloverde tree off the trail. The MEs report supports the likelihood that, having no water with her, she became disoriented, passed out from the heat, fell and hit the rock with her head, dislocating her neck and dying. And such is happening in various places across the world, not just in our hottest city. In the U.S. more people die from heat each year than any other weather-related event. Around the world about half a million are dying per year from heat-related causes (*The Lancet Planetary Health*, 2021). Of that number, last year, 2022, there were 425 heat-associated deaths in Phoenix and Maricopa County, a number that will likely grow significantly this year.

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Going forward with our eyes upon the rearview mirror, is a big metaphor. By doing so we can miss out on so much good, as well as not be prepared for the not so good. Kierkegaard said life can only be understood looking backward, but it has to be lived going forward. And so the trick is how to treasure or accept our past without getting stuck in it... Teaching ourselves to cull wisdom from what's behind us without allowing our past to dictate our future." Amen

**Prayer of the People.** Gracious God, you are more concerned than anyone else both about the state of our planet and the general misdirection of human life. And because the church is how you voice your concern, as well as the vehicle of your actions, Jesus calls us to post red flags about the future and actively witness to a new way of life, one in which humankind assumes dominion over the earth, on your behalf rather than as we please, one in which we stop depleting our natural resources, especially water, and a way of life in which humans stop fueling the global temperature rise. Bring humans together so we might adequately deal with the unprecedented challenges of the future.

This we pray as Jesus taught us, Gracious God, in heaven, Hallow your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us away



from temptation, as you deliver us from evil, for yours is the kingdom, power, and glory forever. Amen