

Apophatic and Cataphatic
Twenty Second Sunday After Pentecost
November 9, 2014
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Text: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Matthew 25:1-13

“Apophatic and Cataphatic”...“Apophatic or Cataphatic”...I imagine that you, like me, often find yourself muttering those words to yourself as you wonder about some particular topic of interest: “apophatic and cataphatic”...right? – no?! – me neither! If you would have asked me last week, I wouldn’t have been able to give you a definition of those words, but I came across those terms this week in an email from our Pastoral Resident Andrew Spidahl. I had read a draft of Andrew’s “And Finally” article for the upcoming December Hope Church News and told him I appreciated what he wrote, but also said that given this month’s early newsletter deadline that part of my appreciation was that I DIDN’T have to write it – so, Andrew responded by saying that my appreciation seemed to be both “Cataphatic” and “Apophatic” – so...I googled it! - turns out that “cataphatic” has to do with knowing or expressing things through positive terms, while “apophatic” has to do with knowing or describing something through negation – for example: I appreciate that Andrew has written an excellent “And Finally” article – cataphatic; I appreciate that I did NOT have to write the “And Finally” article – apophatic. So after my in-depth Wikipedia research, I told Andrew I was impressed! – he told me those terms had stuck with him from seminary, through a combination of being interesting and sounding quite impressive and pretentious when you use them. That email exchange was Monday – by Thursday, “Apophatic and Cataphatic” was my sermon title – the goal of this sermon is to explain to you why.

So when it comes to theology, “cataphatic” and “apophatic” describe contrasting ways of knowing about God. One way to approach knowing God is to express positive attributes of God: God is love, God is light, God is eternal, God is the Trinity – that is a cataphatic approach. One could also express knowing God through negation: in God is no evil; no darkness, no falsehood – and that would be part of an ‘apophatic’ approach. But even more, apophatic would say: the love of God is far beyond what we can even know love is; the eternity of God is beyond all concepts of time and being; the power of God is more than we can ever conceive – and in that sense, apophatic has both a cautionary tone

that avoids the illusion of containing God in our limited knowledge and a mystical aspect to it that emphasizes truth and reality always beyond our full knowing.

OK - that's a brief cataphatic/apophatic primer. And with that in mind, what I've been thinking about as I've reflected this week on the lectionary texts from the epistle and gospel, 1st Thessalonians and Matthew, is that those concepts of what we know positively and what is beyond our knowing could serve well in listening to those texts – and in particular as these texts speak to eternal life and to the return of Christ. Those are important topics – foundational, central theological tenets of Christian faith. Those beliefs are right there in the Apostles' Creed:

Jesus Christ will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

So as we say the creed in our liturgy these essential Christian beliefs are consistently in our worship – but...how often to you hear a sermon here directly on those topics? – eternal life, or the return of Christ? I think it's fair to say that if you look over my and Jill's preaching history that those are not the central themes of sermons; and you'll find that's the case in a lot of mainline Protestant churches, and in the Roman Catholic tradition too. Well, why is that? Because we don't believe it? I don't think so – instead I think the hesitancy or silence has much to do with the huge EMPHASIS that other parts of the church put on those topics in ways that do not resonate with many of us at all.

There is in relatively recent Christian history – the last century or so – a very public face of Christianity that is intensely focused on the return of Christ and on an eternity of heaven and hell - focused in a manner that goes into great detail about all aspects of these beliefs. Starting with the book of Revelation and adding passages such as the Epistle and Gospel lessons today, a heavy emphasis is placed on elaborate scenarios about Christ's return accompanied with a strong focus on assigning people to heaven and hell. And this is usually done in ways that are overdone, speculative, sensationalized – not helpful. So I think many in the mainline and Catholic traditions, seeing that extreme, have found it best – or easiest – to steer clear of the topics all together.

But rather than just steering clear, there is a need to reclaim a meaningful voice of faith on these beliefs. Certainly a critique is needed - but a claiming of our beliefs that is life-giving is needed too. So,

with the I Thessalonians passage, let's contrast some different approaches - here's what you could do: you could assess what Paul says and use it as the basis for mapping out an elaborate scenario called 'The Rapture' - based on v.17 which refers to being caught up into the clouds - in which people are swooped up to meet the returning Christ, with others left behind to suffer; and along with that one could claim to figure out the date this will happen to scare people into getting saved from hell right now. This is expressed infamously in our time through the Left Behind book series and movies, a version of which was recently in national theaters. I am not trying to be ungracious or smug – but it is a horrible and harmful series and movie. I am sure there are well-intentioned people involved, but this is Cataphatic gone bad – this claims to know way too much about what Scripture only gives glimpses or images of – this is cramming entirely different understandings of space and time into our context, and locking God into concepts that Scripture never intended. And above all it makes the marvelous and mysterious beliefs of Christ's return and the promise of eternity into little more than manipulative, sensational threats.

So, instead, what if we would do this with Thessalonians? - be cataphatic AND atophatic – let's say what we know, and what we don't. Paul is writing to a church community - and people have died – the Christian faith is new, and they wonder what it all means: life, death, grief, hope – much as we still do. Paul speaks to their concerns, describing things with details that best fit his vision of the truth – but I believe Paul MOSTLY says this: “since we believe Jesus died and rose again...” – that's the essence, really: because Jesus rose, so in the living Christ we know God also holds our lives. What's essential here are not the details Paul gives, but the good news – the tumultuous, transformative news of Christ's resurrection – the truth that death has nothing to do with God – that the God who made life in Christ reveals the final power of life. The story of Jesus reveals a startling truth: death does not define or determine life – God does – and we belong to God. And what's Paul's point? – ‘therefore ENCOURAGE one another’ he says – this is not the script for a Christian scare-offensive – this is a pastoral word for those who grieve and who know their own mortality. There is much we don't know – questions about how and who and what – OK, we'll keep talking talk about that; we won't figure it all

out, but that's OK too, because we know this is: Christ is Risen - so we know something essential, central, about God and death and life: the God who made us is our God forever.

And how about the parable from Matthew? – the wedding and the young women and the lamps and the oil and the delayed and uncertain arrival of the bridegroom. Well – so - everyone knows what this parable is about, right? It is about the return of Christ in the future and about the need to be watchful and prepared, or else you will be left out – shut out – locked out – forever. Everyone knows this, and knowing this plays directly into the Left Behind scenario of fear and threat – making detailed claims about how the mysteries of God are going to play out. Everyone knows this, except...Jesus begins this parable 'The kingdom of heaven will be like this'...well, in Matthew 4:17, John the Baptist says 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand, has come near'; in Matthew 10:7, Jesus says 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand, has come near' – last Sunday we heard in Matthew 5 of the poor in spirit and the persecuted possessing the kingdom of heaven. Well – it sure sounds like the kingdom of heaven is now! – and here! And maybe what everyone SHOULD know about this parable is to be watchful for the Risen Lord now - a parable to make an impact on faithful living now – participating in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus often told his disciples not to focus on the timing of his return: 'you don't know – it's not your concern– leave that to God'. What we can know is that the promises of God revealed in the Risen Christ are not about fear and destruction, but about fulfillment and renewal – because what we know is the presence of the Risen Lord now, the Lord of life making present the kingdom of heaven – so watch, be ready.

In our communion liturgy there is an acclamation of faith that says: 'Christ has died; Christ is Risen; Christ will come again' – that is what we know – and in many ways that is enough said. But we might also do well to say 'Christ is coming again', which has a double sense of both future and of present – that the Risen Christ is coming among us now, making the kingdom of life present among us.

Jesus Christ will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

There is plenty I don't know about that – which is probably how it should be. But what I do know is that those are not beliefs to have us waiting around for something to come, or to scare us about what is to

come – rather they are the fulfillment and substance of what we are called to now: in a broken world, to witness to and participate in the kingdom of heaven – the God of life among us in the Risen Christ. Therefore, sisters and brothers, *encourage* one another with these words. AMEN.