

THE DAY TO END ALL DAYS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Advent I, December 3, 2006

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

Blaise Pascal once said that “it is better to believe in something that isn’t than to disbelieve in something that is.”¹ That would be, I suppose, the pragmatist’s approach to religion. Like the irrefutable logic of the cemetery plot salesman who argues that it is better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.

Our perspective on the apocalyptic passages of scripture may be a bit pragmatic, like that. Like the Christmas gift that you unwrap which could be either a fruit bowl or a hat, depending on your creativity, it may not be clear at first what we should do with these predictions of how it all ends.

Apocalyptic passages have to do with the end of time, like that description in Luke’s gospel in the 21st chapter today.

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

It all ends, according to Jesus, with a bang and not a whimper. And in spite of the fact that the “Left Behind” series written by Tim LeHaye has made its author a millionaire many times over, most sophisticated New Yorkers are not much concerned nor particularly watchful for the coming of the Son of Man descending among the clouds in power and glory. We are more concerned, practically speaking, with what humanity is doing to end the world than we are with what God is doing to bring time and history to a conclusion.

And the signs of humans making a mess of things are everywhere. There’s the escalating war in the Middle East, or should I say wars, and the chaotic dissolution of Iraq. There is global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer around the earth, increasing pollution, nuclear threats from North Korea and Iran. There is already more than enough evidence of humanity’s hell-bent desire for destruction, than to worry about God’s intention to bring things to a close.

And yet, there is in the scriptures this recurrent theme that at the end of all things God intervenes and Christ returns to judge the living and the dead.

The Second Coming of Christ is the Biblical message that kicks off the season each year in the church on the first Sunday of Advent reminding us that our Advent expectations not only center on remembering the child that was born a babe in Bethlehem so long ago, but they also point us to the coming of the one who will return with judgment in his hands and righteousness in his heart. It is a return about which we have mixed feelings.

So how do we make sense of this strange expectation of Christ's return? And is this a consummation devoutly to be desired, or an end that should cause us to quake with fear? Let's start all the way back with Jesus.

Those who knew and followed Jesus, even Jesus himself, seemed to believe that the day was coming, and soon, when God would intervene decisively and time and history would come to an end. A new reign of God would prevail, but not before cataclysmic events took place on earth. Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies, people would flee to the mountains, the holy city would be trampled by Gentiles, there would be signs in the sun and moon and stars and distress among nations. And what would happen next would need no prophet to interpret it. The Son of Man would come in power and glory to judge the earth.

One of the confusing aspects of this expectation is that nearly every period in history has seemed a time of cataclysmic disaster, a time of distress among the nations and a creation gone haywire. Just think of the Bubonic Plague of the 14th Century, the Influenza epidemic of the early 20th Century, the AIDS epidemic here and in Africa. Think of mutant cancer, our cells fighting against us. Or think of the First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the wars and tensions in the Middle East, in Israel and Palestine, the tidal tsunami in Southeast Asia of two years ago. Any one of them a candidate for the surest sign of the end of time.

Religions have been founded on this expectation of Jesus' immanent return. Beginning in 1831, William Miller of upstate New York began preaching his calculations based on the book of Daniel that the Second Coming of Christ would occur somewhere between 1843 and 1844. He won thousands of converts even though the fateful years came and went and still no return. His Adventist movement would lead to the founding of the Seventh Day Adventists and later to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

So many events and catastrophes in history have come and gone, and still life goes on, no sign of the clouds parting, no sighting of the Son of Man, no return of the One who is coming.

So what gives? What's wrong with this picture? Has God forgotten about the Second Coming? Should we? Was Jesus mistaken about the details? Was this the night dream of a well meaning but overwrought Jesus who claimed more than he should have and foresaw more than was real?

In the first century, there was a clear sense that the world was coming to an end. Jesus himself had said that his generation would not pass away until all the things he had described had taken place and the Son of Man came in glory.

But by the time Luke edited his gospel sometime between 80 and 90 A.D. many of Jesus' generation had already passed away. Luke was copying the words of Mark, and when he got to that section about the end times he must have paused and wondered if he should leave it out, since it apparently had not happened the way that Jesus prophesied.

But no, he decided it should stay. Why did Luke leave this prophecy in? I wonder if it may have been because he sensed that much that he had seen in his own time resembled the ending that Jesus foresaw. Jerusalem was surrounded by Gentiles in 70 A.D. and the temple was destroyed. On the day that Jesus was crucified, the skies

darkened and “the sun’s light failed,” “signs in the sun and moon and stars” as Luke reports it ever so suggestively. And the curtain of the temple dividing heaven from earth, the holy of holies, was torn asunder that day.

Those who lived in the city returned home from Golgotha hill outside the city’s wall beating their breast, shades of those whom Jesus predicted would run from the city. It makes me wonder if Luke, himself, might have thought that there was apocalypse enough for anyone to see that day that Jesus was crucified, as if the world took a turn for the worse, one that only God could redeem when Jesus rose from the grave.

And what better description of the Second Coming of Christ than that Easter morning when Jesus appeared once again to his disciples? You think this is my fanciful meandering?

No less a voice than the respected New Testament scholar, C.H. Dodd, has suggested that perhaps the events of the end times were in fact fulfilled, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God’s decisive act in human history. That in him, the end time came, and in this post-resurrection world a new age has dawned in Christ.

All of this is lovely stuff for theologians, and scholars, but what does it have to do with us elbow deep in dishwater, our hands changing diapers, our tired bodies opening the door to the apartment at the end of the work day, 10:00 at night?

Well it has this to do with us. It reminds us that Christmas for all of its beautiful carols and warm and fuzzy feelings is not only the heart warming story of a special child born to itinerant parents laid in a borrowed manger and nestled in a cow’s stall. It is more than that. It’s always easy for hard hearts to melt at the birth of a child, to picture the baby in the warm glow of the inn’s lantern, the adoring parents nearby, the shepherds and magi crowded close on bended knee bringing their gifts, agape at the tenderness of it all. We all can get close to that scene.

What is harder to embrace is the child become a man, and why he came and what he would do. Harder to get close to the message of freedom to the captive that he would proclaim, his willingness to touch the dead, the leprous, the unclean. It’s hard to accept the incredible ethic of non-violence that he would embrace, the outrageous confrontation of hypocrisy that he would champion against religious pomposity and phoniness. The notice he would give to the Caesars of this world that might does not make right, and power is always subject to judgment.

It is so much easier to cuddle up to the babe in the manger than to get near to the grown up Jesus outraged in the temple who overturns the tables and chases out the moneychangers with a whip of cords; he who will challenge the scribes and Pharisees and outwit them all. He who will shame Pilate’s charges by his silence, and he who will die a bloody and excruciating death on a cross, receiving the worst the world can do while demonstrating the best that God can give.

His righteousness is the world’s condemnation. We have never been able to live up to it. And the judgment is that we would rather settle for feeling guilty than doing what must be done to make things right.

The expectation of Christ's return puts the world on notice that it's not *anything goes*. Some things are wrong in this world when measured against heaven, and there is an absolute scale of justice and righteousness against which human deeds are assessed.

Without judgment; if there is no reckoning, how would we ever know right from wrong? How would we know we are important enough to capture God's attention? How would we know we are worth the effort? Only a parent who has no interest in her child does not discipline him, nor ever teach him right from wrong. To ignore another is the highest form of contempt. Without judgment we cannot know the precious worth of mercy.

On that day of all days when the Son of Man returns to judge the earth, accounts will be settled. On that day torture will be judged as torture and not as rendition. On that day spin will not be mistaken for truth. On that day Amadou Dialou and Sean Bell and Police Officers James Nemorin and Rodney Andrews and all who have died as victims of gunfire in this city will be vindicated. On that day there will be no rewards awaiting the pilots of the planes that were driven into the World Trade Center. On that day lies will be called lies, and truth will be known as truth. On that day the secrets that we have hidden will be shouted from the rooftops and the deception that we have nurtured will be writ large. There will be no plea bargains, no negotiating of deals, no offering of excuses.

But, it will be a great day nonetheless, a day to end all days, quite literally, because there will be, along with the judgment, one more thing. There will be redemption.

Jesus says that when that day comes, we should stand up and raise our heads, we should be glad and not afraid, because our redemption is drawing near. "Take heart" he says, "be encouraged," because along with the judgment comes forgiveness, along with the closure comes new beginning, for when these things take place, Jesus promises, our redemption draws near. Throughout the gospels, the descriptions of the end times, frightening as its symbols may be to our ears, have always been offered as hope. When these things happen, Jesus says, stand up and raise your head, for your redemption is drawing near.

A friend of mine,² tells the story of being a court reporter for a small local newspaper when he was in college, working to help pay for some of his tuition and book costs. He sat in the court day after day and heard the sweep of human failure and transgression pass in front of him. There were car thefts and house break-ins, bank robberies and domestic disputes, assault charges and sometimes a case of murder was heard. Great offenses and small ones, but always for the defendants there was one question of import, he found, only one thing they wanted to know. Who would be the judge? When the door opened on the side of the courtroom and the black robed figure came in, who would be hearing the case and passing judgment?

The answer that Jesus gives is one of hope, gracious and merciful. The one who passes judgment is the one who has come for our sake, given his life for us, showed us how to live. He loves us so deeply that nothing we can do will drive him away. That is the good news of the message of God's coming, our confidence that God is a kind and loving God, faithful and forgiving, made known in Jesus Christ.

How is it that the psalmist puts it, “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you that you may be revered.”³

Here we are at the beginning of these Advent days, leaning toward Bethlehem, but living in a world that is full of clear and present danger. A world where war is every day in front of us, and human suffering is a common sight. A world where lies are mistaken as truth and injustice still has its day. But it will not always be so, not if God has his way, and God will have his way.

It will not always be so, because a child will be born among us who will embody the love of God. And because, in God’s good time, injustice will end and judgment will ring down, and what is wrong will be made right.

We all of us may wonder about the exact details of the end of days, how it all works out. Whether, in fact, a day of reckoning will ever come when Jesus descends in clouds of glory exactly as Luke reports it. That’s understandable, it’s only human to struggle with the details of doubt and belief.

But about this, do not be in doubt, time and history is in God’s hands. There is right and there is wrong, and while it is not always easy for us to figure out which is which, God knows the difference between the two. And while God may be judge of all, God is also Redeemer of all. So stand up and raise your heads, for your redemption is drawing near. And nowhere is more merciful judgment rendered than in the court of the One who is coming.

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¹ As quoted by Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. p. 72.

² Thomas J. Long.

³ Psalm 130:3-4