

## WE KNOW HOW IT ENDS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 2, 2007

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44

The Christmas shopping season started as soon as the plates from Thanksgiving dinner had been cleared. It was then that the doorbuster electronics went on sale and people who had camped out in the cold burst through the doors in a frenzy of Black Friday spending. Merchants are happy that we had the earliest possible date for Thanksgiving, so as to extend the shopping days before Christmas. More time, more sales.

A Jewish friend asked me what I thought of all this frenzy and whether it was possible for Christians to separate out the craziness of shopping from the message of Jesus' birth, and I found myself saying "Not very easily."

The liturgy of the church this time of year is oddly out of step with what the culture is doing. It may be all tinsel and candy canes on the street, but inside the sanctuary there is a purple hue that Hallmark has never had much interest in pursuing.

These four Sundays before Christmas are considered days of penitence and reflection, preparation and searching. It may be ringing bells in the hands of Santa's Assistants with hollow kettles on the avenue, but in the church it's the minor chords of hymns strangely out of step that are droning, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence," and "O Come, O come, Emmanuel." Darker, more somber, less catchy than *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, or *Up On the Housetop Reindeer Pause*.... Inevitably someone will be complaining that we are not singing any Christmas carols during these weeks, and what's wrong with us, or better said what's wrong with Dr. Entriken, that we don't *get with* the season? But there's nothing wrong at all about these advent hymns we sing. They call for us to make of these days a deeper and a richer preparation than simply filling shopping bags or elbowing folks at the cashier lines at Bed Bath and Beyond.

Christmas is, after all, much more than diamonds from Tiffany's and iPods from Best Buy. If that is all we expect from Christmas, then we have missed the whole point of why there is a remembrance of Jesus' birth at all. The first Sunday of Advent wastes no time in driving home the point that along with the birth of a child in Bethlehem long ago, we are looking for the coming of the Son of Man who will meet us at the end of time. We start the season, then, with a scale that is cosmic and a tone that is apocalyptic.<sup>1</sup>

"About that day, no one knows," Jesus said, "neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ...Two will be in the field, one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

In the first century, Christians faced a serious theological problem. The promised return of the Son of Man, the second coming, as we like to call it, had not occurred. It was delayed. And it was a source of discouragement for those who longed for it with eager longing ushering in a time of justice and peace.

Jesus had promised that the Son of Man would return soon, but he did not seem to be approaching with any haste. This created the theological problem of how to explain the delay, and perhaps more importantly, what to do while we wait.

The timing, Matthew concluded relying on Jesus' own words, is not for us to know, but for God alone. Therefore, we must be vigilant, watchful, for "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

What Matthew's version of the gospel has done is to forge a union between eschatology and ethics, between our expectations about how things are going to turn out, and how we live in the meantime.

And how is it going to turn out? What is to become of this worn out, aching, bone-tired world? Will there ever be peace? Will justice ever reign? Will the violence end? Will race ever stop mattering? Can people live together in harmony?

Isaiah has a vision of how it will go. "The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, ...and all the nations shall stream to it." In other words, God will bring peace. Suffering will end. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. The have-nots will finally have more than their share. The illnesses and plagues that bedevil us will be no more. Healing will replace injury. And justice and mercy will abound.

Because that is the world that is coming into being, today's world here and now is drawn and pulled inexorably toward that destiny. And because it is, we are invited to see the world in a different context, even though the time in which we are living is in-between time. We are still urged to remain focused on that place where we are heading and not lose sight of its borders.

If history and time finally rest in God's hands, then how we live and what we do today is judged in the light of whether it draws us closer or moves us farther away from that place where God is. We must give account of ourselves, and we know not when or how soon. So, as Jesus warns us to do, we stand alert and stay awake for we do not know the timing of that day or hour.

Tom Long who teaches preaching at Emory University describes how things change in value once we know the limits within which we are living. He says, "If the dam twenty minutes upstream breaks, then the Rembrandt on the wall is less valuable than the rubber raft in the attic." It is our awareness of the shortness of time and of our accountability within it that sets a value on how we live today. Knowing what lies ahead focuses our thoughts on what to treasure and what not to treasure now.

This week I received word that a friend of mine had taken his own life. Suicide always leaves so many unanswered questions, no matter how detailed the note a person leaves behind, and my friend left none. While I am struggling with the utter selfishness of what he did, that he would abandon his partner to live the rest of his days with the burden of whatever questions hang in the air, I have to say that what really makes me sad is the idea that my friend's vision closed in so severely that he could only see one ending ahead, only one possible script, only one way that things could work out for him... to escape. I wish somehow someone might have known what he intended, what he was

thinking, and therefore been able to get through to him in a way to suggest that the ending he saw was not the only ending possible.

If God can beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, then surely God can mend our broken dreams and heal our aching hearts with a better hope than eye has yet seen or mind has imagined. That's the expectation to which Advent calls us, to keep awake, to stay alert, for we do not know on what day our deliverance is coming.

Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Theological Seminary, tells about a well known African American pastor here in New York whose church in Harlem is located not far from one of the most run down of all urban districts in that part of our city. From the steeple of that church you can get a bird's eye view of the neighborhood, the pawn shops and boarded up storefronts the roach infested mom and pop grocery stores near by, where out front prostitutes and crack dealers ply their trades.

A lot of churches have left the area, but this church just hangs in there, keeping watch, staying alert, as if every moment mattered. They organized a locally owned bank, set up latch key programs for kids, and put together a neighborhood redevelopment program. They started Bible studies in high rises and conducted successful boycotts against price gouging corporations. All this in one of the toughest parts of Harlem. A newspaper reporter interviewed the pastor with an eye to telling the story of the church.

"Sure," he said as he framed one question, "you're doing great stuff. But it's hard to see what difference any of that is making. What enables you and your folks to keep going?" The pastor said, "We've read the Bible, and we know how it ends. We aren't at the end yet," he went on, "but we know how it ends, and that's what makes the difference."<sup>2</sup>

We too know how it ends. It ends with God. The whole blessed thing; today, tomorrow, our lifetime, all of eternity for that matter... it ends with God.

A lot of the time it looks like it won't end with God. We have waited so long for heartening news about the war in the Middle East, our service people keep dying and being injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. We read about the unsettled situation in Pakistan. We hear about the suffering that continues in Darfur, the tribal wars, the devastation of AIDS in Africa, the detaining of a British teacher in the Sudan whose school children named a teddy bear Mohammed, and the court judgment against a young Saudi woman who will receive 200 lashes because she was the victim of a rape. Sometimes the world seems so out of joint, its values turned around.

Add to that our own anxieties and worries; Wall Street is a roller coaster ride, the sub prime market has undermined both our and the world's economies, people are anxious that they will have too little in the way of year-end bonuses this year, oil is creeping up to a \$100 a barrel, and while one strike is over, another goes on and many people this Christmas season are out of work.

What an awkward and out of joint time this is. It's easy to be discouraged, almost like reading some bad novel about everything crashing down and falling apart from within. Some people despair, and some live in fear, some are discouraged, and some are paralyzed by the worrisome nature of it all. Others stay awake and are watching, hopeful and expectant, waiting with eager longing for evidence that God will be there in the end.

I have been moved and inspired in recent months by a friend who is in the late stages of cancer. The doctors have said there is medically no more room to maneuver. So it seemed best to have hospice care take over. At times like that in life watching and waiting is bittersweet.

Some people might have gone home from the hospital and gotten in bed and turned out the lights and kept the curtains drawn and never looked forward to another day. But not my friend. She decided there were some things she needed to do. Clean out closets, get one more look at the beach and walk it's sandy shore, have tea with her daughter at the All American Girl Store, enjoy a luxurious stay in a hotel for a night with her husband, spend time with family and friends whenever she is able to summon the strength. What does it mean to stay awake and keep watch if it is not to live each day thankful for each breath, as if every moment counted?

It wasn't until a year or so ago that I realized that the passages in the Bible that deal with the end of time and the return of the Son of Man, with their dire sounding predictions and fearsome warnings were ironically always heard as words of encouragement and hope in the early church. Sort of a theological promise that it's always darkest before the dawn. They somehow believed that as God's people they had been allowed to peek at the last chapter in Jesus Christ and because of what they saw in him they believed that there is nothing in this life of which we need ultimately be afraid, because the final outcome is with God.

So we have decked the church not in boughs of holly but in somber purple for a season, to remember that the one who is coming is not only the babe of Bethlehem, but also the man of Galilee. One who outlived and who outloved us all, who has shown us the extent to which God will go to reach out to us in love, by giving us himself in flesh and blood, by facing and conquering death on a cross with an empty tomb.

We know how it ends, which is why we go to the font again and again, to remember that in Christ we have died to the old life and risen to the new. And we come to the table and eat of the bread and drink of the cup because Christ is with us when we do, a foretaste of that heavenly feast when all God's promises will be fulfilled. When "...the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, ...and all the nations shall stream to it."

So come, keep awake, stay alert, be watchful and waiting, because you know how it ends.

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<sup>1</sup> This and a number of other references throughout will make reference to phrases included in Theodore J. Wardlaw's article in *Journal for Preachers*; Advent 2007, "Preaching the Advent Texts." (Vol XXXI No. 1: (Decatur, GA.; *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal for Preachers*, *ibid.* p. 4.