

Expecting the Prince of Peace
But When?

November 29, 2020

Here on the first Sunday of Advent, we begin at the ending so to speak. This passage we just heard is known to some as the "little apocalypse" and is also repeated in Luke and Matthew's gospel. It is the assurance that Jesus will come to reconcile all things together in heaven and earth and bring a great reign of peace and goodwill on earth. It is a message of hope and confidence.

But When?

Advent is always rightly seen as a time of waiting and expectancy, and these scriptures tell us it is not just about waiting to open our presents on Christmas morning, it is about a theological / spiritual waiting as well. A waiting and a longing for all things to be reconciled to God. But when?

It often happened with our family that around Thanksgiving time when we lived in Florida, my mom would fly down to stay with us. My daughter Anna as a very young child would get excited about this. One year, I went to pick Mom up from the Tampa airport, Anna wanted to go along, even though it was more than an hour away. We would park and go inside the airport because we wanted to see her just as she came out of the jet way in the airport, and go down with her to get her luggage. We couldn't wait for her to get all the way out to the curb!

So we arrive in perfect time, and I look at the Arrival board and it said just 15 minutes to landing. I told my daughter this, and we had a countdown of each minute. After 15 minutes, I look up and the board said DELAYED. Another 10 minutes. Then another.

Anna handled it pretty well, but finally said, Dad you promised she would be here already!

We can all relate to that frustration. It is hard to wait for things that are not under our control. Grandma eventually did make it.

The Christian community sometimes seems preoccupied with the question of when. Remember the Y2K time when the airwaves were full of predictions about this?

These passages can and have been badly misused by prophets of doom over the centuries. One I recall was a group who gathered 100 years of supplies in an underground shelter in Montana and gathered on April 23 1990 as they had somehow calculated that the world would end. I don't know if they are still in there or not.

Not just in our time, but even way back in early colonial days, these passages rattled people. There is a story of an eclipse of the sun in colonial New England, during which the state legislators panicked and quickly moved to adjourn. But one objected, saying "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. IF it is the end of the world, I should choose to be found doing my duty. I move, sir that candles be brought to the chamber."

That legislator had the right approach I think. After all, if we had a firm date for this event that we could all put on our calendars to mark the reign of Christ, we could really be prepared, We could make sure the hungry were fed, we could work hard for justice. We could be bringing people in to worship. Or we could just go ahead and be doing that already.

These questions to no surprise go all the way back to the disciples. In the gospels, as Jesus stands directly

in front of them, talking about the things to come, death, resurrection, they all ask the question "when". The answer is found in this 13th chapter of Mark as well as Matthew 24 and Luke 21, as it is recorded by the gospel writers. There was an anticipation that this event would come very soon, even 2000 years ago. But it comes down to us, yet unfulfilled today.

To the question, then of 'when?'

Maybe you know the story of the little boy and the grandfather clock. He was waiting for the clock to chime in the living room and he counted 10 11 12 13. Thirteen he said?

He runs in and tries to tell his parents, Mom and Dad come quick- its later than its ever been before.

That's always the way I try to interpret these passages. When it comes to the question of when, it seems to me that its later than its ever been before.

The Bible's answer to the question of when is always - NOW.

It seems the apocalyptic writings never tell us a day and hour, but always tell us to wait and be watchful in the NOW.

Let me share two words that I find helpful, both are words for time in the new testament. One is the Greek word Kairos - that is God's time, particularly the fulfillment of Gods time - the other word is the Greek word chronos - referring to minutes, hours - how we mark time. Where we get our word chronological. Those who want to predict things based on Chronos are most always wrong. Jesus even warns in this chapter against those who pretend to know.

He says beware you are not led astray many will come in my name and say "I am he and the time is near: Do not go after them.

The time Jesus refers to is the Kairos - the fulness of God's time.

The message of this chapter is clear. While Jesus says he will come by surprise - Rev 3 says "like a thief in the night" you will not know when - live in the present the NOW the Kairos moment - watch and pray and you will be able to stand before the son of Man whenever he comes. He even says, "Keep Awake"

In my church in Florida we had a great group of older retired guys, many in their late 70s and even well into their 80s. To celebrate our church's 100th anniversary they decided to do a big renovation of our fellowship area in the sanctuary. They were painting, cleaning repairing - it was awesome. Understandably they got tired, and had to take a few breaks. And the other guys would razz them a bit. So the man who was chair of the property committee leading the project had t-shirts printed for all that I always appreciated.

The t-shirts said "Jesus is coming - look busy!"

We live in a time between two great expectations. We look to the birth of Christ in our Christmas celebration, and we also look to the fulfillment of that birth in this passage. We live in a time of already and not yet. The kingdom of God has broken into human history with the birth of the messiah, and good even amazing things have happened. But we know that we live in a world with much pain and suffering, much injustice, division and disease - there is a 'not yet' portion of the kingdom of God that scripture promise will be fulfilled in God's Kairos.

There is a hymn I often refer to, the last verse of which goes

"When he shall come with trumpet sound oh may I then in him be found"

This might be familiar to you as well - the rest of it goes
On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground
is sinking sand

It was authored by a man named Edward Mote who grew up in the early 19th century, to parents who discouraged religious activities, even reading the Bible. So Edward became a woodworker but at age 34 began to inquire about spiritual matters, and he said he came to work one day and just wrote down those words to that hymn. He said it was like a Kairos moment for him - it was God's moment. And he set these words down that we still sing today. But it wasn't his chronos moment. He continued happily as a woodworker for 20 more years, until he retired and then began study in earnest and entered the ordained ministry as a Baptist pastor in England.

Whether a woodworker or a pastor Edward had the answer to the question of when.

When Christ comes may I be found in him.

A writer named George Bass reflected on this passage with some helpful words:

"Advent is really living 'in the meantime' now and until he comes 'In the meantime' our business is not to sit around and worry or speculate about the end of the world but to be out and about, active, allowing our faith positive expression by the way we live and the good we do in the name of Jesus Christ...that's what he expects of us, 'in the meantime', because he is alive - alive in the world and alive in us."

George Bass "Here Comes the King", CSS Publishing Lima Ohio, 1992, p.20

Watch and pray we do not know the day.

But on the other hand we do know the day. The day is always today, the time is always now. Now is the time to prepare for the Christ child, now is the time to watch and pray, now is the time to sense the Kairos moment of God moving in your life and seize it.

May it be so for all of us. Thanks be to God. amen.