

December 2, 2007

Isaiah 2:1-5 Romans 13:11-14 Matthew 24:36-44

This morning, the word of God continues to rub up against the sounds and pulls of the culture and even our desire to get into the spirit of the season.

Last week was the crucifixion and this week, the first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary always starts the season off with visions of the end times, Jesus' second coming, and the strong command, "Wake up!"

So, should we be afraid? What will Jesus' coming really do? Are we really asleep? And isn't Christmas supposed to be about the birth of Jesus? Why can't we just focus our attention there?

One pastor likened this time to shoppers.¹ There are basically two kinds of shoppers: I fit into the first category, "those who shop with a goal of a particular purchase in mind," and "those for whom the shopping itself is the goal." For those of us in the first group, we go to the store when we notice that our running shoes are worn out. We can walk right by all the other dress shoes, work shoes, and accessories. If at all possible, to minimize our time in the store, we'll go with the goal of getting exactly the same kind of running

¹ "Steady and Ready" from Isaiah 2 and Mt 24 by Leonard VanderZee
(http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/season/Resources/advent/2007/documents/steadyandReady_VanderZee.pdf)

shoe we had before, so we don't have to mess with trying on a whole bunch of other pairs. The goal is to get in and out with the minimum of time and fuss.

But, then there is the other kind of shopper, which includes my mother.

She'll get excited to hear I need a new pair of shoes ... she'll want to go along.

I'll even tell her what store I want to try as we enter the mall, naively thinking

that this time we'll stick to the goal. But, the first store we pass might be

William Sonoma and suddenly we are looking for holiday napkins and

beautiful salad bowls. Around each corner, this second group of shoppers

gain momentum and excitement, as they discover treasures on sale racks and

admire displays in every store window. It is no longer about shoes. For the

second group, shopping is about the experience, it is not a goal-oriented

activity."

As the pastor pointed out, this is not an illustration about which shopping method is best, but that often life takes on the experience of the second group.

"There's no goal. It's not headed anywhere in particular. One year rolls into

the next. One Christmas blends into another. [As we get older, the years

seem to speed up and go faster and faster.] ... He says, "we're sort of aimlessly

wandering through the mall of the cosmos."

Yet, every year, the Advent season tries to break in and shock us into realizing again that there is a goal. That God does have purposes and goals for the completion of what God started. God came in the flesh, as a baby in a stable to meet all our hopes and fears in Bethlehem and to help us see that God will stay true to His promises. So, in this time, we look to that first coming to help us stay awake for Jesus' second coming among us, when God will complete this vision of new life, the world so longs for.

If this is God's goal and our purpose, why is it that we find ourselves wandering? I often hear the deep longing from you that you know you are wandering ... that you really truly want to know and follow your purpose (God's purpose)... that you do not want to keep wishing your days away, ... but the hectic pace, the bills that need to be paid, the illness, the school activities, the constant stream of everyday tasks that need to get done, ... make it hard not to get lulled into this blur of time going by, ... without much remarkable to break up the trip.

Part of the problem is that we have been told to be ready, to wake up, for 2000+ years. We can only stand ready and alert for so long, before we grow weary or immune to the warnings. It is like our National Security alerts ... what does it really mean for us to be at orange or yellow or red? It is hard not

to grow cynical or complacent, as we keep working and caring for a creation that seems to be filled with an endless need for help. So, these texts come and encourage us again that with every moment or encounter we may be looking Christ in the face and offered the opportunity to serve Him.

Secondly, we aren't very good at being patient or trusting in promises. Being given Jesus' name as Emmanuel, "God with us" isn't enough for us. Many of you left frustrated two weeks ago, when we were pondering Luke's apocalyptic, end time passage and I told the story of the forest fire that threatened the camp where I worked for a summer. I wrestled with whether or not to tell you if the fire burned down the camp. ... For those of you who did not hear, they were able to save the camp. But the point was, how do we live confident that whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. The power and ministry of that camp was not the location or the buildings, but the Spirit of God moving among the people to embolden us to love unconditionally and share the praises of God together.

And lastly, there are mixed messages about what these texts mean for our lives and what the second coming or end times will look like. As humans tend to do, we often only hear the word 'end' and often associate Jesus' second coming with negative, violent destruction. Rather than hope, we find

ourselves asking questions like the disciples did, “When will this happen? Will I get things and my life in order in time?” But, Jesus strongly warns against this type of speculation or putting your trust in signs or predictions. Frankly, it is none of your business when ... and those who do claim to know when and how, are not speaking for Jesus. Only God knows and if God refused to reveal this even to Jesus, then what makes us think God would reveal this information to novelists or self-proclaimed preachers?

God knows that in our mouths, this information can lead to a fatalism, which has led many to ignore such things as warning signs from our environment. Jerry Falwell encouraged this outlook several years ago, when “he said in effect, that he had no concern for the environment because Jesus is coming back, and therefore we better use it before we lose it.”² Or more recently, we have been encouraged to see our role in the second coming as Christian soldiers, needing to literally take up arms to violently fight for this final vision, where only a few will be left standing, after this holy war against evil.

Why is it so easy for us to believe this vision of destruction, rather than God’s promise of divine goodness? It is not biblical. It does not fit with our God, who declared creation good in Genesis. It does not fit with our God, who loved

² *Ibid.*

this creation so much that God sent his Son to save it. How do we hold Christ's first coming; a baby, who the angels and shepherds proclaimed as being good news with glad tidings of peace and joy and a light that no darkness can overcome ... with this other interpretation of the second coming? No, "the goal of Christ's saving death and resurrection is not to destroy the world, but to renew it.

When Martin Luther was asked what he would like to be found doing when the Lord returns, he answered, "Planting a tree."³ This is what my dad's dad did in his 90s. When asked what he wanted for his Birthday, he asked us to plant a red wood in his backyard. He wouldn't get to see it grown. Actually, we grandkids would barely catch a glimpse of this tree's potential splendor in our life-time. But, that wasn't the goal. It was a witness to the possibility of the future.

This is what gives our life meaning and purpose, God's promise of a future, a kingdom fulfilled ... this cuts through our wandering and helps us see every moment as a piece of God's future. Whatever we are doing, whomever we are with, we are called to be awake to see how God is working newness and possibility through our words, hands, and confidence in God's redeeming work

³ *Ibid.*

through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Being awake means rising each day with the question of what acorns can I plant, rather than what can I get and use and keep for myself? It means letting go of the questions of how and when, but confessing this day is the Lord's, a gift of surprise and possibility to serve the fulfillment of God's kingdom. It means living in faith, rather than fear.

For Jesus did not give us idle words in the prayer he taught us. God's kingdom will come and Christ will come again in a blaze of glory. There is nothing we can do to make this happen sooner or later. But, it will be the final word of good news for God's creation. Its in-breaking will look like justice, peace, and well-being for all. It will look like rivers flowing up mountains, nations and peoples discovering in God's word, a judge, who will let none of us leave the table, until a just resolution is decided ... where neither side gets everything they want, but will also not get as little as they fear. An arbitrator that will make our need for war unnecessary and not only unnecessary, but will free us to transform those weapons of destruction into tools that bring forth life ... plows and pruning shears ready to produce a harvest, where we will be reaping the fruits of the Spirit and walking in the light of God.

Yes, it is the end of the world as we know it. But, this is good news of glad tidings and joy, because it will be the world God knew from the beginning and wants all creation to be a part.

“Therefore, you also must be ready, ... this is not a drill ... the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.