

Between Two Advents
Luke 21:25-36
December 3, 2006

Go anywhere in town now, turn on your TV, or listen to the radio, and what will you hear? The sounds of “Jingle Bells” or “White Christmas,” and assorted Christmas carols. Everything is decorated in red and green; Santa has made an appearance in several regional shopping centers, decorated trees stand in public places, even telephone poles are adorned with colorful lighting displays of Santa, bells, wreaths, reindeer – in beautiful downtown Bogart where I live, the Christmas decorations were gleaming from the telephone polls before sunset on Thanksgiving day! And everywhere we’re encouraged to “deck the halls” and have a “holly jolly” time.

Our gospel reading really strikes a discordant note in the midst of such holiday fun. Who wants to hear about the end of the world as we know it, when we’re all having such a good time? And yet our scripture for today contains words of Jesus spoken just days before his death, foretelling the advent of “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations. . . . People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

One author has written, “We live in between the first coming of Jesus Christ and his second coming, and most of us feel a lot better about the first one.”¹ After all, the first one is about a baby, and we know all about babies. The second one is different. We’re not sure what it’s about; and the language that describes it is difficult and hard to interpret.

The language that deals with Christ’s return is called “apocalyptic”, which means it is an unveiling of the world that lies behind or beyond this world. The language is full of symbols and dramatic imagery, full of urgency, describing Christ’s coming to finish what he started, a time when, as the carol says, “the hopes and fears of all the years,” that first met at Jesus’ birth, come together again in a final embrace.

I don’t know about you, but this kind of language makes me uncomfortable. For one thing, in the religious climate in which we live, it’s kind of an embarrassment. Apocalyptic speculation is a billion dollar industry now. Most spectacular, I suppose, are the “Left Behind” series of books by Tim LaHaye, which purport to be a fictionalized account of life in the world after the “rapture,” and during the “tribulation.” They claim to be biblically accurate, the only problem is, the whole idea of “rapture”, that is, the bodily removal of all the “good folks” into heaven before God begins to whup up on the rest of the big bad world, is a fairly recent concept and has little biblical basis. But that hasn’t stopped the LaHaye crowd from raking in the bucks. Of course, it makes you wonder, doesn’t it, if the Christ’s return is just around the corner, why are these guys so intent on making all that money? According to their theory, they won’t have time to spend it.

Related to the “Left Behind” phenomenon, is the embarrassment of all of the tacky “rapture related” things you can buy – tee-shirts and plastic placemats with color pictures of wrecked cars and downed airplanes, and bumper stickers that say things like “In case of rapture, this car will be empty,” or “Beam me up, Lord.”

But in addition to the just plain tasteless, Apocalyptic literature, when read literally and not metaphorically, is uncomfortable because all of those predictions haven’t happened yet; but the urgency of the language with which it was written, would indicate that the authors thought the end was coming very soon, even as Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.” Well, we’ve been waiting 2000 years now for Jesus to return and it hasn’t happened yet. Many generations have passed away, and we’re still waiting. Will Willimon has said, “It’s hard to stand on tiptoe for two thousand years.”²

But I think there's another reason that apocalyptic language makes us uncomfortable. Truth be told, we don't necessarily want that glorious return of Christ when the tables will be turned and the last will be first and the first last. It sounds all great and glorious, but, we maybe don't want equality and justice for everybody; after all, we're pretty comfortable just the way we are – buying so many items that have been made cheaply in Third World countries, shopping at Walmart, Sam's club, Target, K-Mart to get the lowest prices, driving cars that guzzle gas faster than the oil wells can pump, lining up at Best Buy or Circuit City at midnight on Thanksgiving so that we can be first in line to buy the new X-Box or Play Station with our disposable, and even our not so disposable, income. If we're honest with ourselves, we like things the way they are.

We're uncomfortable with the apocalyptic language of scripture because it doesn't seem to have been written for 21st century Americans. We feel like outsiders looking in because it was written for persons enslaved, suffering and persecuted, who desperately looked for better days beyond their ability to achieve on their own. And not written for people who's limited understanding of persecution is a sales clerk who has the audacity to say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." Apocalyptic visions came out of the Exodus tradition, from a people "who have a history of being squeezed by Egypt, Babylon and Rome. To these people redemption is the longing of their heart. . . . The coming of God's redemption means justice is coming, liberation is coming, the King of all the earth is coming."³ The return of Jesus will mark the coming of the kingdom of God; the coming of peace and justice to the earth. People in Darfur would love apocalyptic literature; people in Rwanda, people in Iraq, people in Palestine; people in India at the bottom of the caste system.

Last week my lectionary group met as usual on Monday morning at Cups, and Edward Bolen was freshly returned from a 10 day mission trip to Liberia. Liberia is a devastated country, by his description. Peace is maintained by UN peacekeeping forces now in place for 15 years. The people talked almost casually about the devastation of their "latest" civil war, as they pointed out to Edward a Lutheran church in Monrovia that was the site of the execution of over 600 people who'd taken refuge in it during the war. Buildings are gutted and homes are without furnishings because of constant looting. There is no regular postal service and no public school system. Liberians appreciate apocalyptic language.

We don't have that kind of history; the persecution of our Mayflower ancestors was so long ago, and has been so idealized and romanticized, we've lost touch with their passion for freedom. Our only civil war is now 150 plus years past, and we tend to remember selectively the beautiful language of Lincoln's Gettysburg address and the Emancipation proclamation. Our African American brothers and sisters, however, can relate to apocalyptic language because they have deep in their bones the memory of enslavement; native American's can relate to it, and immigrants coming here from all over the world to escape persecution and deprivation can as well. But we, predominantly white and middle class Americans, know little of such passion. And when we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done," there's perhaps a quite whisper "but not yet; take your time."

What we from our privileged vantage point this morning hear as words of destruction and chaos, those under persecution hear as words of hope. They hear Jesus saying, "When things are crashing all around you, anxiety is high and worry is great, when you don't think you can take another breath or live another day, when the temptation is all around you to give up, get drunk, numb out, that is when you must "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Cornelius Plantinga writes that "the second coming of Jesus Christ means to a Christian that God's righteousness will at last fill the earth." and he suggests that "when our own life is sweet, we can look across the world to lives that aren't sweet. We can raise our heads and our

hopes for those lives. We can weep with those who weep and hope with those who hope.” We can look across the world and raise our heads and raise our hopes. Could justice really come to the earth? Could Jesus Christ appear among us in some way that our minds can never imagine in a scenario that would redraw the shape of reality?⁴

If we believe in the kingdom of God we will pray, and we will hope for those without hope. And, most importantly, we will work in the same direction as we hope. In his book *Standing on the Promises*, Lewis Smedes says that hoping for others is difficult, but not the most difficult thing we’ll ever do. Praying for others is difficult, but again not the most difficult. The most difficult thing for people who believe in the second coming of Christ is to live “the sort of life that makes people say, ‘Ah, so that’s how people are going to live when righteousness takes over our world.’”⁵

At my lectionary group discussion last week, Edward Bolen said each of us pastors ought to stand in the pulpit today and say “My job today is to make you uncomfortable.” Well, I’ve tried. Here in these weeks leading up to Christmas when we celebrate the first coming of Jesus, take some time to think about what his second coming might mean to us and to the world, for as lovely as his first advent is, it is his second advent that will redeem the world.

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “Between Two Advents: In the Interim (Luke 21-28),” *Christian Century*, Dec. 6, 2000, pp. 1270-1272. This sermon is essentially based on Dr. Plantigna’s essay.

² Plantigna.

³ Plantigna.

⁴ Plantigna.

⁵ Plantigna.