

Expectation  
Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16  
Luke 12:32-40

“You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

My first conscious memory of saying something out loud about Jesus has always embarrassed me. My brother had not yet joined the family, so I must have been four-years-old and riding unbuckled in the backseat of the car on the way home from church. I am leaning forward to ask my parents a question that surely had its origins in the morning’s church school lesson and a child’s vivid imagination. “When Jesus comes again,” I began, “will you take me to see him?” Given that forced visits to Santa Claus thus far in my life had found me fleeing in terror, I cannot explain this desire to see Jesus who, like Santa, surely would know if I had been naughty or nice.

I only remember asking the question, so God only knows what my parents said in response or what they said to one another later. I imagine silence. Liberal Presbyterians did not speak of such things. Perhaps I repeated the question, thinking they had not heard. I have no doubt my thoroughly skeptical father said nothing; at most my mother may have offered a brief word of assurance in the hope that I would drop the subject altogether. Drop it I did and have for some sixty years!

Scripture, on the other hand, does not drop the subject. All but three books in the New Testament make mention of the Second Coming. Even when it had become clear that Jesus would not be returning anytime soon, hope in Christ’s royal visitation, what is called in the New Testament the Parousia, persisted. So in 98 A.D., Clement of Rome, a very early church father, warns Christians to be “prompt in well doing,” connecting ethics to eschatology (connecting how you order life in the present with what you believe about God’s promised future). Almost a century later Irenaeus emphasized God’s judgment against the Antichrist in the end times. The

Lord, he said, was coming from heaven in the clouds in order to send the Antichrist and those who follow him into the fire. Tertullian, writing in the late second and early third century, imagined persecuted believers caught up in clouds that would meet their returning Lord in all of His glory.

What you notice in Scripture and in the writings of the early church fathers, if read in their historical context, is this: personal salvation is not the point. Because the great good news was that, in Jesus Christ, the reconciliation between God and human beings had been accomplished, the point rather was that the return of Christ signaled the final victory of God's reign over every despotic and demonic power in the social order. The Christian expectation was, in a word, political and led the early church, and Christians now and again since then, to look "beyond the often dark and unbearable experiences of the here and now, refusing to accept the suffering, injustice, lack and loss which characterize so much of life," according to Richard Bauckham, "reaching not upwards to a 'spiritual' escape hatch from this world, but forwards to a time when such things will cease, and the pain and loss [will] be redeemed and refashioned into something good and enduring."

Specifically for the early church, Rome was the beast and those who were martyred for their faith held on to the belief that human history, in the end, belonged not to the powers and principalities but to God. As witnesses to the resurrection, followers of Jesus became "characters in a different story, or at least a version of the same story with a radically different ending." That ending did not send Christians to the lions on the basis of an abstract idea about "eternity", but with an unshakable expectation that the God who raised Jesus from the dead was the same God whose future reign of justice and mercy had already begun. Death had literally lost its sting. Therefore the church was fearless in the face of the injustice and brutality of kingdoms and empires as the preacher of Hebrews reminds us. This was the beginning--Jesus himself had

warned them--of the time of persecution that would end only when the “times of the Gentiles (which is to say the time of ungodly rulers) are fulfilled.”

Nevertheless, somewhere in the fourth century, around the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the empire, says Princeton theologian Ellen Charry, everything changed. The persecution of Christians ended, the “struggle between good and evil turned inward...and Rome was transformed from the enemy into an instrument for the spread of the faith.” Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and one of the great doctors of the church, set out to translate Scripture’s combative apocalyptic language in the service of peace because the “day of the church was at hand...and...a gentler reading” was needed. To this end he “domesticated” the signs portending Christ’s Second Coming by redirecting them from the political to the personal and final judgment that awaited each individual.

“This had the effect,” Cherry goes on, “of both moralizing and spiritualizing [the imagery surrounding Christ’s Second Coming] and of setting the day of judgment in the distant future. Rather than focusing on tyrannical state regimes outside the church, [Augustine] turned attention to the day Christians would have to take account of themselves.”

No doubt many church-goers will hear just such a word in response to our readings this morning, a word about personal morality and the final judgment; a word that counsels introspection and spiritual temperature taking in preparation for Christ’s Second Coming. It was this Constantinian spin on the Second Coming that must have led me to conflate Jesus and Santa in the car that day, to believe for years that Christianity is all about whether you personally have been naughty or nice according to American mores in the 1950s. So if I really wanted to see Jesus when he came again, I had better be nice.

I think Luke would be dumbfounded by such a take on Jesus’ words in his twelfth chapter. Some say Luke could only have written his appended story of Christ’s first coming--of a

babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger--from the vantage point of his hope in Christ's Second Coming; could only have offered the tender signs spoken to the shepherds by the angels because his faith was fixed on the tough signs spoken by Jesus in the midst of Jerusalem's now destroyed temple and recorded later in his Gospel of wars and insurrections, earthquakes and famines and plagues, dreadful portents and signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. That is to say, when all is lost, when the promises of merely human candidates for the job of savior do not avail, at the least expected hour, Jesus will come again. Hope paradoxically reaches its zenith at the null point, where there is no *reason* to have hope.

Or put another way, even as Christ's first coming accomplished our salvation [ended the distance we have chosen to keep between ourselves and God], Christ's Second Coming will complete the redemption of all creation, will signal God's victory over the chaos and death-dealing powers that, from the beginning, have resisted God's will.

Therefore there are two modes of readiness, writes preacher and author Fleming Rutledge: one of rapturous expectation and the other of apocalyptic hope. "In 1968," she recalls, "the Catholic Interracial Council of the Twin Cities produced a remarkable Christmas card. The outside of the card was red-orange, and featured the words of the Benedictus: 'From on high our God will bring the rising Sun...' Then," she says, "you opened the card to find a stark black-and-white photograph of a small African-American child caught by a ray of sunlight as he sits listlessly in the shadows of a slum courtyard. Along with the photo was the rest of the verse: 'to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.'" The next year the front of the card had the words of John the Baptist in red: "There is One among you..." and inside another black-and-white photograph, "this time of a young Vietnamese girl with the blank, stunned expression of a child in wartime, and the rest of the verse: '...whom you do not recognize.'" Under pressure the third year, the Interracial Council "started making cards with smiling,

beautiful white and black people celebrating peace. As far as I know,” Rutledge quips, “the Council was not heard from again.” But the time of expectant waiting remains, says Rutledge and, she repeats, our waiting has two faces: the face of joyful expectation and the face of apocalyptic woes, “the tribulation that overtakes all who stand their ground as the Age to come pushes against ‘the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.’” I think that must be why the lectionary pairs the words of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel with the words of a preacher to Christians whose expectation of a better country was waning in the face social pressure. The sermon that is the book of Hebrews pulls out all of the stops to remind a congregation not unlike this congregation of the witness of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fires, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness...suffered mocking, flogging, and even were stoned to death...sawn in two...persecuted, tormented...of whom the world was not worthy.

Did Jesus not intend his followers to bear witness in just this way as they waited for his return? Speaking in the temple that lay in ruins by the time Luke wrote his Gospel, Jesus said the time between any given present moment and our redemption is the time of bearing witness to God’s reign breaking into the present moment when we least expect it. In sum, the word the church tries to get said is precisely the word abandoned by Constantinian Protestants: word of Christ’s Second Coming. Just so, we are “a cell of messengers and advocates in the world on behalf of the world’s own future. [Our] task is to *interpret*...each reality in the world as an occasion of that hope which is there if Jesus lives, to treat in words and speaking deeds, each hope and fear as a hope for love’s triumph. The church,” Robert Jensen says, “is thus a standing conspiracy in society on behalf of society’s own future. There is no need,” he says, “to be romantic about this. Whenever the church looks big enough and potentially influential enough to

make it worth the trouble, the state and current ideology will try to co-opt the church as a religious auxiliary—and probably succeed. Then this recognized church will, like other religious societies, be a conservative force. But so long as the church remains at all the church, the word by which it lives will evoke disquiet...will bring forth disturbers of the peace for Jesus sake.”

May this church, more and more, be that standing conspiracy on behalf of society's future, a community whose speech and actions make it clear that we desire a better country, a city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God, lest God be ashamed to be called our God when Jesus returns.