

Advent I
November 27, 2016
The End of Time
Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44
Rev. Dorothy Cottingham
Christ the King Lutheran Church, Tigard, OR

Fellow Ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Gracia y paz de dios del Padre, Hijo, y Espíritu Santo grace to you and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Happy New Year!

We begin this new church year where we left off the old year – listening to what Jesus has to say about the eschaton – a Greek word meaning last or the end of history. We enter Matthew’s gospel in a strange place at the beginning of Advent. Instead of anticipating Jesus’ birth we begin near the end of his life.

We will work our way backward these next four weeks. When we come to the fourth Sunday of Advent we will finally be waiting with Joseph and Mary for the birth of Immanuel.

For now, it is good to spend this time in anticipation and preparation. It is good to wait and listen.

There have been nearly 250 predictions of the eschaton, the earliest by Romans in 634 BCE. Evangelical preacher Warren Jeffs predicted that the end would be December 23, 2013. When that date came and went, he revised it to December 31 saying his calculations were off. Obviously his second set of calculations was wrong, also.

But! Be wait, there’s more! Jeanne Dixon says we have until 2020, AND Sir Isaac Newton’s biblical research sets the date sometime in 2060. I think I’ll hold out for Orthodox Judaism’s Talmudic prediction of 2239.

Wouldn’t it be great if we actually knew the date of the eschaton? We could prepare for the apocalypse – another Greek word meaning to reveal.

The apocalypse is characterized biblically and in myth traditions as a time of cosmic transformation and judgment. It includes stories of catastrophic upheavals and stories of people being swept up to the heavens – “raptured”. Apocalyptic images are disturbing and even frightening.

Street-corner prophets and authors, ancient and modern use the threat of death and destruction to bully their audiences into changing their lives. They capitalize on the public fascination with the end-times.

Have you heard of or read any of the 16 “Left Behind” novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jensen? Beginning in 1995, they have made millions of dollars spinning tales based on their interpretation of the more than 100 biblical prophecies of the end-times.

Today’s text is a cornerstone of this series . . . the rapture . . . one will be plucked up and the other one left behind judged by their righteousness.

About the same time that the gospel of Matthew was written in 80 CE, there was a group of Jews known as the Essenes. Led by Simon bar Giorra they were proclaiming the end of time and the final judgment the ancient

prophets had foretold. This could be the source of inspiration the Evangelist, Matthew drew upon to share the good news, the truth about Jesus' second coming.

But when we listen carefully to this text, we hear a different perspective from LaHaye and Jensen, Simon bar Giorra and all of the would-be predictors of the end of time. There is no fear and no judgment on that day.

Jesus says, just as in the days of Noah, people will be doing normal everyday stuff. On the day of Jesus' coming, people will be working side by side in the office or the factory engaged in completely normal activities and one will be taken and the other will not.

It is the element of surprise in this text that creates anxiety for so many. We are tied to our calendars, schedules and plans. We don't want to miss anything. We are defined by our busy schedules. We announce, with a sigh – and a small measure of pride: "I'm just sooooo busy!"

Busy doing what?

The next four weeks can be exhausting! Decorating, planning, cooking, shopping . . . trying to live up to an unrealistic image of a perfect Christmas.

STOP!

Here's the truth. Advent is NOT the prep time for Christmas. The word Advent means anticipation of something huge! A major event, the arrival of an important person, the coming of something spectacular.

Advent is NOT the anticipation of Christmas. Advent anticipates the coming of the Lord for all time.

We know that Christ has come, we believe that Christ will come again. God HAS entered the world in the person of Jesus Christ and God WILL enter the world to reign in righteousness and justice.

So, how do we live in this already but not yet state of uncertainty and waiting. Do we live in the darkness of fear or in the light of hope? Do we live in dreadful anxiety or joyful watchfulness?

Here's a plan: We stop playing "crack the biblical code". We give up our decoder rings and our mathematical calculations. Jesus is clear about the futility of those games. "Of that day and hour NO ONE KNOWS!"

And Jesus means NO ONE . . . not even HE knows!

My dad died 16 years ago today. He endured years of a slow spiral into the brutal dementia that is Alzheimer's disease. In the early days of that illness he told me that his idea of eschatology had evolved in unexpected ways. He had come to understand that there are many layers to end-time theology. He believed the biblical witness to the second coming of Christ: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ WILL come again.

Knowing that historic eras come to an end as technology and medicine and science advance, Dad also understood that each of us faces a personal eschaton. He knew that one day he would be the one "plucked up" and others would be left behind, for now. He knew that there is no judgment in being plucked up and there is no judgment in being left behind. It's just a fact. What are we to do in the meantime? How are we to practice waiting?

Paul's letter to the Roman Christians calls us to wakeful and sober living. That does not mean we are to be anxiety ridden insomniacs.

We are called to be prepared, hopeful and faithful insomniacs, joyfully anticipating the time when God's creation will be whole and well in God's praise.

We are called to live in watchfulness – watching out for our neighbors. We are called to live in a state of preparedness – coming to the house of the Lord to worship and praise our faithful God, gathering around the table, sharing the body and blood of Jesus.

We are called to live as citizens of a world in need and a creation groaning under the burden of injustice and inequity. We are called to live as God's people paying attention to God's world, not out of fear for the coming catastrophe but engaged in God's plan for all of creation.

We are called to live rejoicing that God is present in the ordinary and the mundane, while anticipating the full completion of God's creative force.

Dad's personal history came to an end on November 27, 2000. While he was waiting he was a living witness to God's presence. In the later stages of that hideous disease, even when he could no longer read the printed words on the page, he carried with him, EVERYWHERE, a Bible.

When his voice failed, he mouthed the words of the Lord's Prayer and the Creeds. God was with my dad to the very end and Dad is at the throne of grace today and forever.

And that is all we need to know about the end times.

God is with us. Immanuel has come. Christ will come again.

Thanks be to God!