

First Sunday of Advent - December 2, 2012

Wading in Faithfulness: Passing on Grace and Mercy

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:25-36

This is Advent – a time of waiting.

What on earth are we waiting for?

Some might say it has nothing to do with earth – it's all about heaven.

But if our waiting is for Jesus – then it has everything to do with our life here on earth!

We wait to experience what those who encountered Christ Jesus two millennia ago experienced – to experience Jesus face-to-face, in the context of our everyday life, when all has been made new, when God's shalom reigns!

This may be a new perspective for some of us – because we may think that seeing Jesus is about our future life in heaven – an escape from this earth.

Our Lucan text, seems to support this:

- **escaping** our present life, escaping our present experience
- because God's judgment is coming.

Luke 21:36 “Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

Growing up this is exactly how I thought about Jesus' return.

We are in the “end times” and these end times were all about escape, leaving this world behind, going to a better place – being with Jesus in heaven.

So, it would seem that this passage reinforces that believing in God, trusting in Jesus is all about escaping our life on earth someday.

But with such a belief, we have little concern for present human struggles, for stewarding creation, for seeing God's shalom being present on earth, just as it is in heaven.

We do not need to think about such things because we believe Jesus is coming again to take us away from all this.

But this is not the import of this passage.

First, in light of Jesus' first coming – taking on our humanity, God was validating our being human.

Afterall, being human is a gift we have received from God. If being human was not important, God would not have embraced our humanity through Christ's incarnation.

Second, the earth was given to us as our place of residence, the place where we are to exercise stewardship, to work in relationship with God. **This is our home.**

Third, “heaven” is often a euphemism – to talk about God and where God is. In Matthew’s Gospel, Matthew has Jesus speaking of the *Kingdom of heaven*, rather than the *Kingdom of God*.

So, ultimately to think about salvation, heaven, and all things being made new as involving an escape from this earth, I believe is to not only miss the point – **but to get it very wrong.**

Our being made new, the earth being recreated, **is to give us a second shot at dwelling on this planet without making a mess of things.**

This seems to be strongly iterated in Revelation 21, in which God not only recreates heaven and earth, **but God takes up residence on earth:**

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

So it becomes apparent to me, and I hope to you as well, that we are not meant to escape life on earth, but rather,
– living with God, our salvation, our hope of all being made new, is an embracing of God’s intent for us in not some place called Heaven, but here in this place – on a new earth.

– As human beings we are meant for this place and meant to live life abundantly in this place.

Christ’s bodily resurrection is declaration of this: Jesus not only embraced our humanity in the incarnation, he continues to embrace our humanity through his resurrection – and we embrace a new humanity, a re-created, set free humanity, by embracing the resurrected Jesus
– his life becomes our life!

So, what is the Lucan text expressing?

We are to watch and pray, be continually in an attitude of relying upon God, relying upon one another as God’s people, so that we may indeed escape . . .
– but not the earth,

Rather, what we escape is the destruction that we as humanity are bringing about by our constantly living graceless and merciless lives, by living selfish lives, by living lives not concerned with neighbor, not concerned with creation, not concerned with God.

What is described here has been interpreted as God’s judgment, but what is being expressed, rather, is what we have brought upon ourselves by destroying the gift God has given us in our being created human and being given the gift of life on earth.

Through our lack of stewardship, through our lack of relationship in being a helpmeet to one another,

Through our lack of reliance upon living our lives in relationship with God.

We are destroying ourselves . . .

Therefore, to watch and pray is to live in reliance upon God and one another;

To watch and pray is to live embracing the resurrected bodily humanity of Jesus;

To watch and pray is to live participating in passing on grace and mercy

– why? so that we might escape destroying ourselves.

Advent, then, is an anticipation of embracing our humanity in relationship with God in the midst of our normal everyday lives.

We anticipate Jesus' return not to escape our life here, but rather to embrace a different kind of humanity, a humanity full of grace and mercy, a humanity that passes on grace and mercy.

Advent is the anticipating of what our everyday lives are growing into as we look forward to seeing Jesus face-to-face!

N.T. Wright calls this a “collaborative eschatology.”

“Because [we] believe that resurrection has begun with Jesus and will be completed in the great final resurrection on the last day, [we] believe that God has called us to work with God, in the power of the Spirit, to implement the achievement of Jesus and thereby to anticipate the final resurrection, in personal and political life, in mission and holiness. It is not merely that God had inaugurated the “end”; if Jesus, the Messiah, was the End in person, God’s-future-arrived-in-the-present, then those who belong to Jesus and follow him are empowered by his Spirit are charged with transforming the present, as far as we are able, in light of the future” (Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 46).

How, then, do we live now in this time of Advent, in this anticipation?

We ask where is all this transformation? I don't see it.

My mid-October through end of November was sort of a blur for me – and though many good things happened, I felt out of step, out of sync, dis-rhythmed.

It began in mid-October with one of Lynne's nurses dying

- receiving the call and then going with Lynne to be with her nursing staff at midnight as they were trying to come to grips with her death
- her memorial service at Condell a few days later
- my experiencing chest pains on the CROP Walk with ensuing tests and angiogram
- visiting, listening and praying with Kate and her dad as he was laid up in hospital
- our Fall Congregational meeting
- the MEDA trip with Linda early November
- our Covenanting Sunday and welcoming all whom God has brought into our community
- the ongoing concern, hospitalization and prayers for Linda's health, for Jeff's health
- involvements at Advocate Condell – the annual Gala, CPE Interviews, CPE teaching, Thanksgiving service
- being Lynne's assessment “model” for her skills testing at University of St. Francis
- my building my shed trying to get it walled, doored, and shingled before Thanksgiving and the ensuing aches and pains are reminding me I am getting too old for this.

Yet, none this is out of the ordinary – this is all part of normal everyday life
– and yet for each one of us, I am discovering that something ordinary is all it takes to knock us off of our rhythms.

We expect life to be different, but “this is the way life is!”

We may want to escape the day to day stuff of life – but the reality of Advent is that we are being called to figure out life together, in reliance upon God and God’s Spirit so that we can learn how to make the most of our day to day days and somehow participate with God in transforming the world.

What overwhelms us in life is not so much what we struggle with, **but our inability to take control of our struggles, to direct our lives the way we want to direct them**

– this never-ending struggle with trying to be in control is what overwhelms us
– and we get tired.

We become frustrated when our emotional, spiritual, and financial resources dwindle
– we feel we are on our own.

But this Advent, I hope we can hear something different.

In the midst of our difficult lives, rather than seeking a way to escape these difficulties, we are being called, as the people of God to live lives that reflect the life of Jesus
– passing on grace and mercy.

Advent then, is all about engagement, rather than escape!

I have been listening to Christmas music on 93.9 and this station is involved in passing on grace and mercy, making Christmas wishes come true for families in difficult circumstances, their stories being told on air, and the station sharing gifts of love and grace to make Christmas a more joyous season for these families.

Living in anticipation of Christ’s presence, is for us to realize that In Advent, and in everyday, we are the presence of Jesus in the world.

In the midst of the difficulties of life that people all around us experience
– as the people of God
– the Spirit of God compels us to pass on the grace and mercy of God we have received to others
– not just at Christmas
– but every day of the year.

So how do we go about living passing on grace and mercy?

It begins with living out Advent differently
– the hope and joy expressed through Advent are all meant to give us a different perspective in the midst of our living

– a living that does not long for some future reality far from here, but to embrace the future reality that is present in our here and now.

Hear our Advent texts again:

Psalm 25: 4 – “Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior and my hope is in you all day long.”

These words of encouragement are not meant to remove us from our human experience, but rather are meant to ground us in our humanity.

They are meant to help us to learn to walk with God and with one another in the midst of our days.

To be shown God’s ways, to be guided into God’s truth, to be taught of God, is a calling to live in communion with God “all day long.”

1 Thessalonians 3:12 – in the midst of Paul’s distress and persecution he is encouraged by the faith and steadfastness of the Thessalonian church – and his prayer for them is this:

“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”

This is not just an interim ethic shaping the way we are to live until Jesus comes again and sets us free – we are empowered by God’s Spirit to live “set free” lives now – because we are meant to live out our humanity on this earth.

And so increasing our love for one another and everyone else is the way we are to grow into the fullness of our being human – here and now.

This is the hope expressed by Jeremiah:

“In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called; The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

Advent is a time of hope, a time of God coming in Jesus, and Jesus coming again

- for God coming near to us, face to face with us
- not for taking us away, but for grounding us in our life here on earth in a radically different way
- a way that is rooted deeply in relationship with God so that we celebrate God being with us and God walking with us, and we being with God and we walking with God
- this is a picture of what human life is to be like and will be like in the new heaven and the new earth.

This morning I received an email from our Conference Minister Chuck Neufeld – he sends out such an email to all IMC Pastors every Sunday morning to let us know he is praying for us. This is what he had to say this morning:

“As I pondered how each of you might explain the meaning of Christ’s coming, I found myself praying that, if anything, you would remember to claim whatever meaning it has for *yourself!* Let the branch that has sprung up *spring up for you!* Let God’s justice and righteousness come alive for and in *you.* Let it all be for *you.* And, as you claim it *all for yourself,* realize that *it’s all for everyone else too!* There’s plenty to go ‘round! That’s the just and righteous thing about God’s love. It’s all for everyone! And that reality ought to remind us of the privilege and obligation we have as followers of Christ — to make sure that it does indeed get around to everyone!

My prayer this morning is that you and I would allow the promise of God's incarnation in Christ come alive in us in brand new ways. ***The day has come! The time is now!*** May everything we do and say communicate our readiness to receive all that has been promised and to claim all that is ours for the asking. Thanks be to God."

This is the humanity we are called to live into!

Our hope for living in shalom amidst the struggles and difficulties of life

- is to live in connection, in relationship, to walk with God
- to receive God who has come to be with us and to walk with us
- who has sent the Spirit of God to be with us, to guide us, to teach us, to discern God's ways
- to live as human beings on this planet with one another
- with God
- in communion with God and with God's people.

This is the hope and joy of Advent

- not merely as a future hope, but a present hope, a present reality!
- **passing on grace and mercy in this world.**

In this way we come closer to seeing Jesus face-to-face.

Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus!