

Advent 2015 - The First Sunday in Advent

Paul Versluis (November 29, 2015)

The theme for the first Sunday in Advent is not about the birth of Jesus, his first coming; it is about what is called the Second Coming of Jesus. The early church believed Jesus would come again and bring in the fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

Today's scripture reading is from Luke chapter 21. This apocalyptic story is repeated by both Matthew and Mark. All three writers devote an entire chapter to the story. This passage has been for me one of the difficult passages in the New Testament to understand and interpret. Let me tell you the story as I hear it.

One day Jesus and his disciples were sitting on the side of the mountain looking across the valley at the temple. The disciples point out to Jesus the magnificence of the temple: "Such great stones." The temple may look beautiful on the outside, but for Jesus, on the inside, it is as he called it, "a den of thieves." Their religious leaders were more interested in money and power than in service and prayer. The recent movie *Spotlight* would be a modern example of the systemic corruption of a religious system/political system. Jesus startles his disciples. He tells them the temple was going to be destroyed and not one stone would be left on top of another.

Is Jesus acting like a street preacher who is prophesying the end of the world? Or is he acting like a prophet who is challenging systemic injustice and greed? Or, maybe both.

This is a significant allegation, a rather big deal, so Peter, James, John, and Andrew arrange to meet with Jesus in private. They ask Jesus two questions: "When will this happen and will there be a sign?" Perhaps they have some money stashed in the temple bank.

Back in the fifth century, Victor of Antioch commented on this text: "They [the disciples] asked one question and he answers another." They ask when will this happen and will there be a sign and at this point in the story Jesus doesn't answer their questions. Rather he tells them that many false prophets will come and claim to be speaking in his name. Don't believe them for they will just lead people astray. Perhaps Jesus is cautioning us to be wary of religious preachers and scholars who claim to know the answers to the disciples' two questions. Many people are going to claim to know, but they are fraudsters.

Jesus continues. There will be wars and earthquakes and famines. Don't be terrified by these. The end will not follow immediately. You will be in for a hard time. If you stand for me and my kingdom values, it is likely you will be arrested and beaten, even betrayed by family and friends, and some of you will even be put to death. If this happens to you, the Spirit will give you the words to speak. You need to endure, to be faithful, and perhaps it will go well for you, perhaps not. It seems to me that in this situation Jesus is talking about events in *their* near future.

Jesus continues, "The temple is going to be desecrated and there is going to be a war. When the temple is desecrated, this will be a sign for you to run and hide in the mountains. Don't even

stop to get your possessions, just run.” This seems to me not to be a sign of the end of the world but rather a sign of the end of the temple.

Now I add these words to Jesus’ story that seems to be collaborated by other texts: “When you see the temple desecrated, it will be a sign for you to leave Jerusalem. But with regard to the end of time, I don’t have a clue. No one knows the end but God. The end of time is ambiguous, a mystery that is beyond us all. So don’t go and believe people who think they know God’s time. They don’t know.”

But then Jesus goes on to say that there will be a day to come when the powers of the heavens will be shaken and all shall see the Son of Man coming [ascending] in the clouds with great power and glory. “Stand up, raise up your heads because your redemption is coming.”

Jesus tells a story about a fig tree. Just as you know when a fig tree sprouts leaves you know it is summer, in like manner, when these things begin to happen, know that the kingdom of God is near. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.”

N.T. Wright solves this dilemma by saying that what they saw was Jesus ascending in glory and power rather than descending sometime in the future.

I personally continue to believe in what is called the second coming of Jesus, but the concept is full of ambiguity and mystery. Tim Geddert, author of the Believers Bible Commentary on Mark, suggests Jesus was intentionally being ambiguous. I believe that other texts suggest a second coming as well, but in the end, Jesus is himself being ambiguous. Only God knows this.

On the one hand, with regard to the end, religious conservative/fundamentalist prophets claim to know too much. There is no ambiguity or mystery. They claim to know the time of the end and the signs of the times of this end.

On the other hand, with regard to the end, religious progressive/liberal prophets, also claim to know too much. For them as well, there is no ambiguity or mystery. They claim to know that there will be no second coming, no miracles or a divine transformation of physics.

Both the far sides in this debate claim to know too much about God and the future. I personally want to keep an open mind to the possibility of a second coming. Either way, I see a new world coming. A sermon from this passage needs to focus on hope rather than destruction, on faithfulness rather than fear.

Jesus calls us to speak words of hope and promise in a world filled with fear and terror. This passage contains fear and destruction, but ends with hope and good news. In a time of chaos, Jesus’ words are meant to raise up our heads and our hope for redemption.

If and when we face personal chaos, persecution, terror, violence, war, if we are driven from our homes because of our race or religion, we may be tempted to betray our friends, resort to violence, run away, get drunk, and give up our faith. Jesus is encouraging us to

continue to be faithful in love and service, to hope that in some manner or form, in this world or in the next, that redemption will come. The way to freedom and peace is always based on the foundation of justice,

Poet W.H. Auden wrote:

We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible;
We who must die demand a miracle.

(W.H. Auden, *Collected Longer Poems*, page 138)

Whether the miracle is that of human effort or divine assistance, or as I imply, a bit of both, I for one will keep an open mind. I don't believe in the Second Coming of Jesus because of creed or text, but because I take a humble view of human potential. I am aware of my own weakness and ability to harm and misunderstand. I am open to the miracle of divine restoration of all things because we may fail and I need a hope that is beyond our own ability.

For example, we are on the cusp of being able to genetically improve a human life through genetic modification. We are or will be able to exclude imperfections, inherited diseases, and weld together the machine and the human to achieve unheard of potential. In these incredible discussions, I find myself on the side of caution. I think if we play God, we end up doing more harm than good.