

Last Sunday was the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the liturgical year. We heard a reading that marked the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus and the transition to the reign of heaven. Still hanging on the cross, we heard Luke's Jesus make a promise to a thief: "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Today, we heard Matthew's Jesus talking about how the reign of heaven will come to us as unexpectedly as a thief in the night.

Matthew's Gospel opens Advent for us, marking the beginning of a new Church year. It feels, in a sense, like we've come full circle. After hearing about the end of the historical Jesus' life last week, we naturally want to turn our attention to the baby born to Mary and Joseph. But we won't have readings about the pending birth of Jesus until the *fourth* Sunday in Advent. Against our expectations, every Advent begins with talk of the "end times" before we start revisiting the stories of the "beginning times."

Our Advent readings do tell of the coming of Jesus the Christ, the Son of Man, but rather than a single note—a story about the birth, life and death of one man—we start to hear a chord comprising several notes. In other words, we do not come full circle so much as we make a spiral movement, coming back to a remembered moment with new insights. Promises of the inbreaking of the kingdom are made possible by the death and resurrection of the Son of Man. These are overlaid on the promises made possible by the birth and life of the son of Mary and Joseph.

We live at the intersection of these times. This moment, *right now*, is the unexpected hour in which the kingdom of heaven is breaking in. *And* this moment is also the hour not yet full of the kingdom still to come. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard described this as living between time and eternity; between the finite and the infinite.

Kierkegaard went on to say that the only bridge to God is the one that God provides—the bridge of faith that can come to us only after we recognize the futility of our own efforts to meet our Creator. That may not seem to be as comforting as we might hope, nor are the images from our reading from Matthew.

"Keep awake," Jesus says. Keep awake as if you were watching for a thief. Keep awake so that you can be ready for the surprising and unexpected ways that God breaks into life. God comes uninvited and unscheduled, disrupting the normal flow of our lives in unexpected ways at unprepared times.

Matthew's Jesus compares God's coming to a thief breaking in during the night. God's coming will catch people as unprepared as the people of Noah's day, when the people were swept away as they went about their daily routines—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. When the Son of Man

comes "...two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left." We're left wondering why Jesus warns us to keep awake.

More than a few American fundamentalists combine this passage with snippets from Hebrew scripture or codes that they interpret from other Christian scriptures. They work hard to cobble together support for the expectation of a day on which God will lift some people physically away from the earth to be with God. And then a vengeful and terrifying Jesus will leave the rest of us behind to suffer God's fiery wrath. Is that why Jesus warns us to keep awake?

God may indeed come into the world through crisis and cataclysm. But I presume that in choosing his examples, Jesus knew that in the Noah story, the people who were "taken" drowned in the flood, while those who were "left" were saved in the ark to begin humanity anew. And didn't God promise that never again would all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and that never again would God allow a flood to destroy the earth? Or is water just a loophole?

Other less dramatic interpretations present this passage as a reference to the end of each human life, at which time each of us will stand before God to give an accounting for the life we lived. It's true that the overwhelming majority of us have no idea when we will die. And when death does come, only our personal history comes to an end, not all human history. The Son of Man will catch us unaware and, according to this perspective, take us before the great judgment seat of God where we are unlikely to have much opportunity to put things right. Is that why Jesus warns us to keep awake?

Maybe. But there's still that reference to Noah, where all the action took place right here on earth, not in some heavenly court in the afterlife. The context of this passage opens the way to a third interpretation of the "end times."

Matthew's Gospel was written in Greek sometime around 80 to 85 C.E. Jesus had died and had been resurrected nearly 50 years earlier. Just 10 to 15 years before this Gospel was captured, Titus and the Roman Empire had destroyed the Second Temple and put down the Jewish revolt. Hope could easily have evaporated as the expected return of Jesus became an on-going delay. Matthew's community had to rethink their expectations.

You see, first century Middle Easterners did not have much interest in thinking about the future. The future was God's to know—and God's *only*—so any human effort to learn it would be futile. They lived almost entirely in the present moment, until Matthew persuaded his community that their hope was in a not too distant future.

We, on the other hand, have become almost fully *future*-focused. We start thinking about college when a baby is born. We start preparing for our retirement when we start our first job. We seek to protect our future selves with

401(k)s, investments and a variety of insurance plans. We have become so future-oriented that, unlike our present-oriented mothers and fathers in the faith, many of us miss the present moment entirely.

After nearly 2,000 years of waiting for the coming of the Son of Man, we also need to rethink our expectations. And there is a starting point in this Gospel reading. “For as the days of Noah were,” Jesus begins, “so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Now, let tell you about a delightfully slippery word: “parousia.” It is an English rendering of Matthew’s original Greek word that belongs in the passage to read: “...so will be the parousia of the Son of Man.” Parousia in this reading can mean “the being beside” or “the presence” of the Son of Man. St. Paul used this same word in his letter to the Philippians to refer to his own “presence” and the negative form to refer to his “absence.”

Hear Jesus saying: “For just as the days the days of Noah, so will be the presence, the ‘being-beside,’ of the Son of Man.” Now, we can speculate on some future day of reckoning characterized by separation and violence. We can conjecture about some future day of judgment, perhaps at the end of each human life. But I propose a more *presence-* and *present-*oriented option here at the opening of Advent.

What if we let this Gospel challenge us with God’s claim on us right here, as we are right now? Advent is partially about waiting for the promised light to come, but it is also about keeping awake to see more deeply into the present moment. That’s the nature of our spiraling liturgical movement. We return to a remembered past moment with insights into the present, trusting that each turn is God’s movement making the future kingdom clearer.

The unexpected day and hour are not inactively waiting for us off in the future; they are rising even in this day—in this very hour. We may never be fully awake and we will *never* be fully ready, but watch: God is breaking into our lives even now. Life is a continual awakening to the dawning light of God within us, among us and around us. Keep awake, watching for God’s light and trust that God is at work transfiguring you and me and all the darkness of this world into Divine light.

---

Works consulted:

Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong. *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.