

Baby Jesus or Cosmic Christ?

Luke 21:25-36

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on November 29, 2015]

I

In the comedy film “Talladega Nights,” Will Farrell plays the part of racecar driver Ricky Bobby.

Ricky is a religious man and always begins his prayers at meals and other occasions by saying, “Lord baby Jesus.”

At one point, his wife Carley calls him on this:

“Hey, you know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don’t always have to call him ‘baby.’”

Ricky responds:

“Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I’m saying grace.”

II

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, when we begin annual preparation for the birth of the Christmas Jesus in Bethlehem.

One of the challenges of Advent is that the baby Jesus of Bethlehem is not the only Jesus we expect and not the only Jesus who shows up.

Most of our attention during the hectic days between Thanksgiving and Christmas is, quite naturally, focused on the arrival of Christmas and the birth of the Holy Child of Bethlehem.

Christmas is, after all, a warm, family time when we decorate our homes, bake special Christmas goodies,

exchange gifts,
 and sing “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,”
 even if that homecoming is only in our dreams.

Part of the wonderful good news announced by the angel to the shepherds outside Bethlehem is just how close to home,
 how immediate and how personal,
 the birth of Jesus is.

“To you is born *this day* in the city of David a Savior.”

In other words, the angel assures the shepherds that this grand and glorious event will happen not on some remote shore
 or in some galaxy far, far away,
 but here and now,
 in their own neighborhood.

Nothing could be closer to home,
 to the heart and the hearth.

But the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes,
 “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,”
 the Christmas Jesus,
 is not the only Jesus for whom we wait in Advent.

As the gospel reading on this inaugural Sunday of the church year announces, we are waiting not only for the lowly Jesus, the humble baby, who is born in a stable and laid in a manger
 but we also wait for the Jesus who shows up emblazoned across the vast canvas of the cosmos as the curtain rings down on history.

We wait for the Christ who this time will arrive not in a humble village,
 but in cosmic splendor at the end of all things...
 the “Son of Man coming on a cloud,”
 appearing in power and glory,
 who brings “distress among the nations,”
 and a shaking of the “powers of the heavens.”

And even though we sometimes forget it or overlook it,
 in Advent we not only celebrate the first coming of Jesus,
 but we also look outward and upward toward the second coming of Jesus as well.

III

Now if you are like me, you have received hundreds of Christmas cards in your lifetime with pictures of the baby Jesus in a manger.

Have you ever received (or sent) a Christmas card that depicts the second coming of Jesus?

I'm guessing the answer is "no."

And here is why the infant Jesus gets most of our attention during the Advent season:

First, the heaven-rattling, smoke-and-lightening images of the second coming are
 ...more jarring to our imagination,
 ...more disturbing,
 ...and less comfortable.

It is easier for us to embrace the infant Jesus than the Cosmic Christ who prompts people to "faint with fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

Ricky Bobby said, "I like the Christmas Jesus best."

We do too—if we are honest enough to admit it.

Given the choice between the Cosmic Christ who might be coming in a thunderclap at any moment,
 causing distress among the nations,
 most of us would take the baby Jesus.

A second problem with the second coming of Jesus is that we can scarcely imagine what to do with such a notion.

Christians who are more literalistic in their interpretation of scripture...

those who take their theological cues from the *Left Behind* series...

those who, like I was in high school, are still enamored of Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*,

can perhaps envision Jesus descending from the clouds to the Mount of Olives as trumpets sound while the whole event is covered live in CNN.

But that sort of literal understanding of scripture is lost on many of us.

Shannon Johnson Kershner, senior pastor of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church, spoke in a recent sermon of her dislike of a literal approach to end time events because she grew up in Waco, Texas, in the shadow of Dallas Theological Seminary, where dispensationalism rules the day. She explains,

"Now, dispensationalism might be a new term for some of us here at Fourth Church (and at FPCP, I might add)...dispensationalists claim they know exactly how the world is going to end. They know because of the descriptions of time periods, what they call dispensations, that they see in the scriptures via a method of literal interpretation. With this literal method of scriptural study, they've determined [very specific conclusions](#) about the end times, conclusions with which I, and our Reformed theological Presbyterian tradition, have fundamental disagreements."

Despite all that, you will still see bumper stickers that read,

"In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned."

You will still hear Christians say things like,

"I'll see you next summer, if the Lord doesn't come."

But most of us don't go about our business day after day wondering if a thunderclap from heaven will cancel tomorrow's staff meeting.

So what should we do with these biblical images and with the promise of the second coming of Jesus?

IV

It helps to remember that Luke's picture of the "Son of Man coming with power and great glory" is expressed in apocalyptic language.

Apocalyptic language is trotted out by the writers of the New Testament whenever they are trying to say what simply cannot be said in everyday speech.

When we enter the world of apocalyptic, we leave ordinary literal descriptions behind and enter the world of the poetic, the metaphorical, and the symbolic.

As biblical scholar John Barton has noted:

"We know that a text which began, 'The stars will fall from heaven and the sun will cease its shining, the moon will be turned to blood' ...will not be likely to continue, 'the rest of the country will have sunny intervals and scattered showers.'"

So when Jesus in our gospel lesson begins to talk about the end of all things, he speaks with an apocalyptic religious imagination:

"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory." (21:27)

Note in our text that the phrase, "the Son of Man coming in a cloud," is in quotation marks.

That is because Jesus borrows this image of the Son of Man from one of the earliest apocalyptic writings, the Old Testament Book of Daniel.

The fact that Jesus speaks in apocalyptic language means that he is in effect saying to his disciples and to us,

"Look, you want to know about the end of time. Well, it cannot be described in ordinary speech. You have to reach for it out on the edge of your faithful imagination and even then you will not grasp it. So let me give it to you in images, pictures, parables, to help you along."

Understood this way, this portrayal of the second coming of Jesus in Luke 21 is unimaginable good news.

It announces that the ultimate end of all things is not some tinhorn human dictatorship, but Jesus Christ the Savior.

History does not end in a whimper
 or in a bang
 but in redemption.

Standing there in glory at the conclusion of all things is not the evil of ISIS
 or the greed of Wall Street,
 or the pride of our own egos,
 but the Son of Man.

Those who try to bend history toward horror and holocaust do not get to tell the end of the story.

The end of the story is the mercy of God.

So don't tremble in fear.

Rather, "stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near."

The reason why the end of the age creates foreboding and distress among the nations is because we have chronically invested in the wrong future.

The nations have always desired to be empires and to maximize profit and power.

For example, it was recently reported that executives at Exxon-Mobil, the largest oil company in the world, knew as early as 1981 that the burning of fossil fuels was contributing to the warming of the planet.

But the company has spent over 30 million dollars since then to promote climate change denial—

similar to how for decades the tobacco industry denied the connection between smoking and lung cancer.

Our world is dominated by the lust for profit and the thirst for power.

Reformed theology teaches us that sin infects every human institution, and the lust of greed and power is ever-present in human experience.

But the same theology teaches that when the curtain lowers on history, the glory and power will belong to Christ alone, and the words of the old hymn will be shown to be true:
“O where are kings and empires now.”

V

Luke’s picture of the end times is not, therefore, an invitation to stand on tiptoes and look out over the horizon of history for the signs of Christ’s coming.

Down through history, there have been numerous examples of Christians who thought they knew when the Day of the Lord would be.

They would quit their jobs,
 sell their possessions,
 don white robes,
 and go stand on mountaintops waiting for the apocalypse,
 which, of course, always failed to happen.

Most recently, the eBible Fellowship, an internet church based in Philadelphia, predicted the end of the world on October 7, 2015.

Chris McCann, the leader and founder of the group, said,

“According to what the Bible is presenting it does appear that 7 October will be the day that God has spoken of, in which the world will pass away. It’ll be gone forever. Annihilated.”

McCann added that, according to his interpretation of the Bible, the world will be obliterated “with fire”.

Well...in case you haven't noticed...

the world did not end in a fiery cataclysm on October 7.

Jesus says all such predictions completely miss the point.

We should instead...

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees. Every time they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that the seasons are changing, that summer is near.

“So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” (Luke 21:29-31)

In using the commonplace image of a fig tree,

Jesus is saying that even today,

here and now,

we can see the green leaves of Christ's redemption sprouting forth.

We should look for the cosmic and ultimate in the immediate and the near at hand.

The light that will shine in glory at the end of all time is already beaming shafts of light into the darkness now.

A marvelous illustration of this comes from Brother David Steindl-Rast, who in his book, *Deeper than Words: Living the Apostles' Creed*, writes:

My favorite lines about Christ's "Second Coming" are in the story "A Christmas Memory" by Truman Capote. In this autobiographical piece of great delicacy, the author describes his last Christmas with the woman who brought him up. The author is seven at the time, she is in her sixties, a childlike soul radiant with inner beauty. They are each other's best friends. On Christmas Day, the two of them are lying in the grass, flying the kites they made as presents for each other. Suddenly the old woman experiences a moment of mystic insight. She admits that formerly she had imagined Christ at the Second Coming shining like the windows in a Baptist church, sunlight

pouring through the colored glass. But now she realizes with utter surprise and delight that what she has always seen – what we always see all around us – is Christ in glory, here and now.”

Listen: looking for the in-breaking of God’s kingdom is not a matter of giving away your possessions,
 putting on a robe,
 and going up on a mountain to wait for the apocalypse.

It is more like watching the growth of a fig tree in your own back yard.

VI

In his book “The Difference Heaven Makes,” Christopher Morse surveys what the New Testament has to say about heaven.

He finds that many of us have it only half right.

We talk at funerals and in church about people “going to heaven,”
 as if heaven were a distant place toward which we are traveling.

But the perspective of much of scripture is the opposite:
 Heaven is coming to us.

“Heaven” is a biblical image for the place from which God acts toward the world and heaven is constantly moving toward us.

In Revelation 21 John envisions a new heaven and a new earth coming down to earth:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. (Rev. 21:1-3)

Like ocean waves breaking on the shore,

the very life of God keeps breaking into our world,
and we can feel the spray and smell the salt.

In other words, the life of God keeps “adventing” into our time...
our history...
our lives.

And it is that “adventing” that we prepare for during the season of Advent.

VII

So to sum it all up, my friends, these Advent pictures of the end of time give us a glimpse of the glory and saving power of God,
revealed to us in the here and now.

In the words of Blanche DuBois in “A Streetcar Named Desire,” as she suddenly experiences a moment of love and grace:

“Sometimes there’s God so quickly.”

As Christians we are to be, in the words of Christopher Morse,
“*on* hand for that which is *at* hand but not *in* hand.”

We are to stay awake,
keep our eyes open,
be alert for the advent of God
that can happen in any moment
and in any situation.

We can then join with God in what God is doing in the world,
reminding ourselves that it is God’s doing,
not our good intentions
or our worthy deeds.

We can be a part of God’s redeeming work in the world,
realizing that we do not own it or originate it.

Thus, it is “at hand” but not “in hand.”

The second coming of Christ,
 the cosmic redemption that brings all of human history to its final resolution,
 is to be watched for not in the clouds,
 not in trying to figure out the times and the seasons,
 but in the ordinary events of everyday life—

a family gathered around the Thanksgiving table offering grace;

a walk in the park with a friend;

the voices of the congregation lifted in a hymn of praise to God;

food graciously prepared and served at the Monday community meal;

the beauty of the full moon;

the opportunity to reach out to a friend in need;

the smile of delight on the face of one's grandchild;

and, yes, welcoming the baby we are all waiting for—
 the Christmas Jesus who came to us in Bethlehem,
 and who will come in glory as the Cosmic Christ.

Amen.

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