

“Beginning with the End”

Luke 21:25-36, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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“The end is near, the end is near,” would proclaim my professor, Gonzalo Castillo, not on the last day of class before the final exam but on the first day of class at the beginning of the semester. Gonzalo Castillo was a wise man. He knew that Seminary students were well practiced in the art of “never do today what can be put off until tomorrow” and so his first message of each term was designed to put us on notice that he would not accept the kind of second rate work associated with the last minute, late night, caffeine-driven style so many future ministers had already perfected and would later carry over into their ministries in the form of Saturday night sermon writing. “The end is near, the end is near.” So much to do, so little time, better start now or you’ll pay later, don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today. Hard habits to break. Hard habits to break, indeed.

The season of Advent is usually understood as the period of expectation of Jesus’ birth. This is the first Sunday of Advent and the end is near. Sure, we *know* he was born on December 25, I mean it’s not *really* a secret, now is it, but knowing that only adds to our sense of anticipation. For four weeks, we recall the run-up to Jesus’ birth and all the excitement that naturally precedes a birth. It is not so often, however, that we consider Advent as the period of expectation of Jesus’ second coming. I think this is partly because it is so mysterious — When IS

he going to come back? There's no real countdown, no "six more shopping days until the end of the world." Sure, Jesus comes on schedule every year at Christmas, but what's up with the open ended commitment to return in the future?

As you ponder that, let me suggest that perhaps it's because God is not finished with us yet. Maybe there's more for us to accomplish on this earth, maybe more people coming to have a personal relationship with Christ, maybe more justice and peace inaugurated throughout the world, maybe some mission we can't yet envision. But clearly, for reasons known only to God, Jesus has not yet redeemed the second half of his round trip ticket from earth to heaven. We await, with baited breath, the return of our Lord and friend though we might be tempted to give in, to stop waiting and hoping, to believe that someone back there in Biblical times heard Jesus wrong, or had their own axe to grind, and that this returning business was just a first century equivalent of an internet hoax.

But at the same time, we hold firm in our hope that he will return, that the promise will be kept. We remember that even though God spoke through Jeremiah the promise that an heir of David would sit again on the throne, it was at least 600 years before it came to pass. Between Jeremiah's prophecy and the coming of Christ, the throne went unoccupied. Maybe there is a parallel to this return about which Jesus speaks in Luke. There's a promise, but we just don't know when the payoff comes. Maybe 600 years, maybe 6000, maybe 600,000 — it is not for us to say. So what do we do in the meantime?

Well, before we answer that question, let's see what we've got in the way of Biblical data. At the beginning of the section of which today's reading is a part, Jesus is sitting with some unnamed characters, perhaps his disciples, when some of them begin to admire the temple and its ornamentation. Jesus responds in a provocative fashion by saying, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown away." And then, in a classic case of "Ask a dumb question..," Jesus responds to the anxiety caused by his prediction of the destruction of the temple, by launching into a long teaching on what lies ahead for the faithful and the not so faithful alike. Allow me to summarize the seven point plan. First,

- 1) False prophets will try to lead people astray, claiming to be the Messiah
- 2) Then, presumably for the faithful, arrest and persecution will follow, there will be betrayal by family, and hatred expressed for the sake of the name of Jesus
- 3) Then terrible wars and insurrections, earthquakes, famine, plague, dreadful portents and great signs will come along.
- 4) Then, Jerusalem will be surrounded and overthrown
- 5) Then an undetermined amount of time will pass while the "times of the Gentiles are fulfilled," (perhaps the rule of the Roman Empire)
- 6) Then there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars; roaring of the sea, people fainting and the powers of the heavens shaking, and then, and only then,
- 7) The son of man will come in a cloud with power and great glory, and by all accounts, we're *still* waitin' to see that.

And you thought the manger scene was about all the anticipatory drama you could handle. No wonder the long term version of Advent wants for popularity.

Now, for centuries, people have been trying to figure out just when these things are supposed to happen, trying to read the fig leaves to know that the time has arrived. Of course, every attempt at prediction has fallen short and the clouds remain Messiah-less. But that hasn't stopped people from trying. I remember a time when I was in college. I was picking up a video at a Christian bookstore when a young man burst in breathlessly and pushed me aside at the counter, and in a rush of barely intelligible words asked the clerk if there were any more copies of a book called "88 Reasons For the Rapture in '88" because he had to, and I quote, "get ready for the rapture." And I wanted to say to him, though I held my Christian tongue, "Buddy, if you ain't ready yet, you ain't got enough time to get ready!" As I recall, he bought his book, another charlatan got a little richer, and this poor guy probably spent his whole Advent worrying about whether or not he was ready.

If Jesus has truly laid out for us something like a timeline of events for which we should watch, we are probably still in that vague and undefined period waiting until the times of the gentiles are fulfilled, whatever that really means. The Jerusalem temple was destroyed and the city overthrown, but we have yet to see the kinds of things described as immediately preceding the second coming of Christ, the signs in the sun, moon, stars, and seas. So we're still waiting, just as every generation of believers has waited, just as the early church waited. The early Christians really believed that Jesus was coming back within their own lifetimes.

This gave rise to a certain “Yeah, whatever” attitude among some of the believers who figured that what would be the point of doing anything since the end was already so near. What a waste of time, you can imagine them saying. The Apostle Paul confronted this attitude among the Thessalonian faithful, telling them about those who had become lazy and dissipated, “Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary of doing what is right.”

In case you didn't hear that echo of what Jesus was saying to *his* followers, let me say it again, “Brothers and sisters, do not be weary of doing what is right.” “Doing what is right” seems to me to be the shorthand for what Jesus says when he tells his followers in our reading tonight to “be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.” Oh, what a great, old word is *dissipation*, whose definition is to spend so much time and energy on indulgence of pleasure, especially drinking, gambling, and the like, that one harms oneself, one's energy is lost. You see, dissipation comes from the Latin word for scattering or sweeping away. Our lives, our souls, get scattered like leaves in the wind when we engage in those pursuits the Victorians labeled dissipation. If you are doing those things, you are not being alert to the signs that the Son of Man is coming. If you are lying face down in the gutter, you are going to miss the main event, the coming of the glory of God and it sure seems like this

is one time when you do need to be present to win the prize, the prize of your redemption drawing near.

And here's another echo. That little phrase, "your redemption is drawing near," is an echo from the beginning of Luke's gospel, from the story of Simeon at Jesus' presentation in the temple. You remember Simeon, who was described as righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and filled with the Holy Spirit, this Simeon saw the child whom Mary and Joseph brought to the temple to be dedicated. And Simeon took the child in his arms, praised God, and said, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Luke was a very crafty writer. He begins with an end and ends with a beginning. In Simeon we have the ideal disciple at the beginning of the story, even as Jesus is describing the ideal disciple at the end of it. Simeon endured all the oppression of the Roman Empire, all the wars that raged through the region, and yet he was ever vigilant for the coming of his redeemer, ever vigilant for the signs of the coming of the Son of Man. And as a result, at the end of his long and faithful life, he was able to stand and behold the Son of Man, for he had been alert at all times, praying that he might have the strength to escape trial and tribulation and see that day of promise fulfilled. There was no

dissipation, no drunkenness, no worries of this life. Just his alertness for the signs, a watchfulness while living faithfully.

The end is near. Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today. Be vigilant. I want to suggest that we begin our Advent by thinking about the end, about the redemption that awaits us, not just on Christmas morning, but also at that time we cannot predict, that time far from now, the hours and days and lifetimes between which we should spend as Jesus advises so that we do not miss the coming of the Lord. Would that we all might experience the joy of Simeon, seeing face to face our redemption, servants dismissed in peace. The end is near.

Friends, you don't get "ready" for the end of the world by reading a book at the last minute. You get ready, you stay ready, day by day, by doing what is right, being alert, praying that you may have the strength to endure all we must endure as human beings, whether it's those fantastic occurrences Jesus described or the more private ones like the death of someone we love, or the loss of a pet, or a divorce, or whatever befalls us that might cause us to believe that Jesus isn't coming back like he promised. Those are the wars and earthquakes, signs and portents, false prophets, betrayals and persecutions about which we should be watchful. Those are the things which might cause us to give up hope, and then turn to the counting of the worries of life and dissolute living. It takes faith and strength to remember that God keeps promises no matter how long it takes to fulfill them, for the world, and for each of our lives.

Earlier, I deferred the question about what we are supposed to do in the meantime, while we're waiting around for God to do God's last big thing. I think it is safe to say that you should do what Jesus tells you to do, and that is to begin with the end, with the vision of redemption brought by the Son of Man coming in a cloud, and work backwards until you reach the moment you're living in. Live like the end of the world is coming tomorrow and you want to be awake to see it. Live with a sense of urgency for whatever you discern God wants you to be doing to hasten the end of the world, to hasten the redemption we all look forward to. When we can picture the end and start working backwards, we'll have our marching orders, as a church and as people of faith.

It is with that in mind that on this first Sunday of a new Church year, we embark on discerning our collective marching orders as Escazú Christian Fellowship by beginning a year's worth of reflection on one of the aspects of our Mission Statement, namely the heart of Jesus Christ that we are called to be in this time we spend waiting for signs and for our redemption. Throughout this year, from now until the next Christ the King Sunday, we'll delve deeper into the person of Jesus Christ, what we might call his heart, and how he expressed that to those whom he met and ministered. How did Jesus care for people, what form did his compassion take, where was his ultimate loyalty? These are matters of the heart, Christ's heart, and the hearts of Christians today. This first Sunday of Advent begins Year C in the three year cycle of lectionary texts, and for ECF it

will begin the “Year of Christ’s Heart.” God willing, in subsequent years, we’ll more deeply explore what it means to call ourselves the hands of Christ and the voice of Christ, but it is Council’s prayer, and my own, that as this year progresses, you will find yourselves closer and closer in touch with Christ’s heart and your own, so that, in the words of our reading from 1 Thessalonians this evening, “...the Lord [will] make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...and...so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” May God grant each of us the stamina and the grace to live our lives, and this Advent, beginning with the end God has promised us. Amen.