



“Past, Present and Future”

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

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First Sunday of Advent

Karl Barth...arguably the greatest Christian theologian of the past two centuries...famously described the Bible as...a “strange, new world, the world of God.”

And he also said that...“if we wish to come to grips with the contents of the Bible, we must dare to reach...far beyond ourselves”...into this strange new world.

On this first Sunday in Advent...our reading from Mark...about the “second coming of Jesus”...it is indeed a very good window into this strange new world. Many...in fact...find this notion...that Christ is going to return...quite strange indeed.

No...I don’t think the “second coming” is most fashionable of ideas...these days.

Many snickered...when Harold Camping...first predicted that the world was to end...and that Christ was to return...on May 21st of this year...

and snickered again...when Camping adjusted his date to October 21st....and then again...many of us...snickered....when he apologized and retired.

And yet...the “second coming” is the gospel Lectionary topic for the first Sunday of Advent...year-in...and year-out.

In a sense...this forces us...to as Barth says...“reach beyond ourselves”...and reconsider a story...that some may prefer to ignore.

Our reading...comes at the end of a chapter in Mark...Chapter 13...that is often called the “little Apocalypse”....and like all Biblical Apocalyptic...it is...of course...a prophecy about the future.

Our reading...is part of this larger tradition...Apocalyptic...which is an important strand of the Biblical narrative. In addition to our reading...other major examples include Daniel and Revelation.

And like our reading today...the purpose of Apocalyptic...is to address a people under great strain...a people who are hoping for drastic change...hoping for an overturning of an unjust world order.

Apocalyptic is meant to present...often disturbing images...in order to shake things up...with the ultimate goal...being to give hope...to those who are without it.

And this is exactly what Christ is doing...in our reading. He is speaking to the Disciples...at the end of a chapter-long discourse about a coming time of tribulation.

In the early part of the chapter...prior to our reading...Christ speaks about catastrophic turmoil that is to come...with great suffering...and disaster...including the destruction of the beloved Temple of Jerusalem.

The world will be turned upside down.

Christ speaks of disturbing events...things like...brother betraying brother...and woe to those who are pregnant during these times...not exactly the stuff of...a Christmas children's sermon.

But when we come to our reading...Christ shifts gears...to a more optimistic note...telling his Disciples...that after all of this suffering: "they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds...with great power and glory...to gather his elect."

In other words...Christ is coming back...to gather up his beloved followers...and this I think is very comforting. But the other edge of this...the other implication...is that there will also be judgment...and that isn't necessarily so comforting.

And then Christ continues...letting the Disciples know that this wasn't to be some distant event. No...instead...he says..."Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place."

And so...what we have here...is a prophecy...of not only imminent redemption...but also imminent judgment.

And to complicate matters...the one who is doing the judging...is the very one...who we look to...as our redeemer...the one who we believe makes our forgiveness possible.

We probably all have a favorite Christmas carol. Mine is "O Little Town of Bethlehem"...and it's because of one line...one line in particular...that gets me every time. "The hopes and fears...of all the years...are met in thee...tonight."

Just the thought that somehow...in some mysterious way...the birth of this tiny baby...is going to set things right...going to address all of our hopes...and our fears.

Yes...it gets me every time I sing it. It's a good thing we dim the lights during our Christmas carol service.

But I think it is...both our hopes...and our fears...that are stirred up...when we consider God's redemption...and God's judgment...when we consider...the return of Christ.

Christian theologian and author...Frederick Buechner...who we quote often here at Plymouth...he puts it this way: "Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects our wish that somewhere the score is being kept."

But the good news...as Buechner further tells us...is that "the judge will be Christ...The one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully."

What Buechner seems to be implying...is that...whether we realize it or not...many of us probably do hope for something like...the return.

We may well take great comfort in the notion...that God is indeed...keeping score....and is going to do something about it.

Croatian born...Yale theologian...Miroslav Volf...makes a similar point...but he takes it further. And in the process...his words can seem shocking.

Volf is a man who knows something about brutality and unfairness in his native land. He's seen it...up close.

And he makes the case...that there is great power in believing in God's judgment...and in God's retribution. He says that such belief...can help us...avoid taking judgment...and retribution...into our own hands.

Here's what he says:

My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires the belief in divine vengeance. My thesis will be unpopular with many in the West. But imagine speaking to people (as I have) whose cities and villages have been...plundered, then burned...whose daughters and sisters have been raped...whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. Your point to them – we should not retaliate. Why not?

And then...Volf comes to his point: “The only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God. **Violence thrives today...secretly nourished by the belief...that God refuses to take up the sword.**”

This is hard to hear. Even though...thankfully...the Bible...in so many places...clearly instructs us...to leave the judging to God...this is still hard to hear.

But Volf closes with a point that is easier: “...if God were NOT angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence, that god would not be worthy of worship.”

Now...taking this even further...I wonder...what use it would be...to pray to a God...who we feel isn't interested in justice...fairness? And even further...what's the point of praying to a God...who we don't...believe can...even if in some unknown way...do something about injustice?

And this is the central hope...behind the “second coming”.

No matter whether we believe this is an actual event that is going to happen all at once...or if we choose to see it as a continual...and more mysterious process...it is basically what we pray for...each and every Sunday...in our intercessory prayers.

We pray for God to intervene...somehow...some way.

We...tend to focus...we can't help but focus...so much on the love of God...and the forgiveness of God...but far less so...on a judging God...and certainly not a vengeful God.

And yet...the very notion of forgiveness...it really doesn't make sense without judgment. We are being forgiven for our sins...because we are judged. Judgment and forgiveness...they are two sides of the same coin.

And when we cut to the chase...despite our discomfort with the notion of a judging God...this is deeply embedded in our prayers...and it may well be exactly what we long for.

But there is another point here. And when we reflect further on what Volf has said...I think it comes to the surface.

Volf is essentially saying...that our belief that God is in some way coming to judge...that this frees us...from our own propensity for vengeful violence.

Or to say it differently, when we trust that God is angry at injustice...and believe that God can...and will...do something about its...we are better able to leave the judging to God...and are better able to give over to God...our anger...and our propensity for violence.

And this too...is the point of the “second coming”...and also...of the “first coming”...2,000 years ago.

God wants to take away our sins...to forgive our sins. It is the center of the Christian faith. It is our story.

Anger and violence are just two examples of sin....that Volf happens to focus on. No doubt...we all have plenty of other things in our lives...other sins...that we hope Christ can help us with...that we can give over to God.

At it's core...the coming of Christ...whether for the first time...or again...and again...it is about turning to God...learning to rely on God...not just on ourselves. It's about admitting that we are flawed...and that we need God.

And here today...Christ also very much lifts up the mystery of God...the mystery of God's power...**the mystery of God's coming.**

In effect...he counsels us...not to try too hard...to figure out the details. After all...he says, "...about that day or hour...no one knows, neither the angels in heaven...nor the Son, but only the Father."

Here...Christ seems to be simplifying our task. We are to simply "keep alert"... "keep awake." Like kids excited about the coming of Christmas...we are supposed to look forward with anticipation for the coming of salvation...yet again.

Here we see a beautifully profound mystery. While we don't know the details...we are still to have faith.

Maybe those who try too hard...to figure out the details...such as the date and time...maybe they are just a little bit guilty of the sin of hubris.

And the fruits of this kind of hubris can indeed be troubling. Just consider the fact...that some people who were awaiting May 21...and October 21...they actually gave up all of their belongings.

No...it appears that Christ wants us to stay humble...to not over-reach...and instead...focus on giving our troubles...our sins...over to God.

I had never heard of Louie Zamparini...that is before my mother told me about the last book my father ever read. The book is called "Unbroken"...and it is the remarkable story of a true hero...who survived WWII...against all odds.

Zamparini...was a star Olympic athlete...who...like so many stars of the day...enlisted in the service.

His plane was shot down over the pacific...and he and his buddy...they set a new world record...surviving at sea...on a raft...for 47 days...with no food other than birds they could catch and eat raw...and with sharks...surrounding them constantly.

But they finally did escape this hellish situation...to enter into a worse one. They became POWs in Japanese war camps for the balance of the war.

And Zamparini's experience was particularly bad...because one of his guards...a man they knew as "the Bird"...took it upon himself...perhaps because of Zamparini's fame...to berate...and torture...and make Zamparini's life even more of a living hell.

There is no way to do justice in this short time to the horrors that Zamparini survived...but he did. And this Book..."Unbroken"...it tells a remarkable story of resilience...determination...fortitude...courage.

And it ends with a surprising twist.

The hero returned home...seemingly not broken...by the experience. He began a new life. Got married.

But then the demons began to come. Every night...the Bird...came back to him in nightmares...to the point where he was afraid to sleep. Every night...for years.

Not surprisingly...he began to drink...heavily...to the point...where his marriage...and his life...were falling apart.

And then he came up with a plan. He was going to go and get the Bird. He was going to try and find him...in Japan...and kill him. He wanted vengeance.

His wife was about give up on him. But as a last ditch measure...she decided to try and drag Louie...to a Billy Graham revival...in Los Angeles.

At first...Louie was reluctant...but he decided to go along. And what he encountered mostly angered him. One thing in particular. Graham had the audacity...to accuse him...and everyone else there...of being sinners.

Here was Louie...a man of unparalleled courage...and no small amount of integrity...and he had to sit there and listen to this.

As Graham was calling for sinners to come forward...for an altar call...in fury Louie got up...and ran for the exit. But somehow...as he was running...desperate to get free of these gross accusations...something made him stop.

It was a long forgotten promise he had made to God...on that raft at sea...to serve God...if somehow he survived.

And amazingly...it all began to make sense. And he turned around...and went to the altar...and gave his life over to Christ...to God...that very night.

After the revival...he went home...and threw away all of his bottles of alcohol. And he never again...dreamed about the Bird.

Almost magically...his demons...they were gone...never to return...for the rest of his very long life...which continues today.

And...not only did he drop all plans of vengeance. He actually...went to Japan...to meet with his former guards...to forgive them.

Somehow...this fallen hero...was able to come back to life...and give up his vengeance...giving it over to God...freeing himself...and in the process...gaining new life.

This...I think...is the meaning of Advent.

We are to begin anew...reconsidering our lives...reconsidering...how we can give our problems...over to God...and find new life...in a God...who seems to keep coming...in the past...in our present...and into our future.

Yes...it is a strange story...very strange indeed.

The Kingdom of God...it is a strange new world.

Amen.