

November 27, 2011: THE FUTURE IS NOT ALL MAPPED OUT

Mark 13:24-37; 1 Cor 1:3-9; Isaiah 64:1-9

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When I was growing up, there were two schools of thought about the End of the World, and they both looked like a Cecil B DeMille epic film. One school of thought saw the Second Coming as a nuclear holocaust, predicted for the past 2,000 years. *Waiting* for that End was expressed as fallout shelters and duck-and-cover drills. The other school of thought used the word “rapture” a lot. *Waiting* in that case seemed smug (“I’m going with Jesus on the first bus”) and it was filled with evangelical zeal (“Better get your ticket”). There has got to be another way of waiting for the End of the World.

Advent is about waiting, so today’s scripture readings tell us not only *what* we wait for, but *how* to do it. We are waiting for Jesus, which is not the same as waiting for Christmas. From past experience, we know that, given enough time, December 25 will come. My brother-the-fisherman knows that walleye season opens every year in May in Minnesota. He is impatient, the wait feels interminable to him, but put that same brother in a boat with a rod and reel, and he is now the Upper Midwest distributor of patience. He is so attuned to his task, that he anticipates a fish’s nibble with a thousand readiness activities.

We’re talking that kind of waiting during Advent, the kind that starts with our eventual goal and the thousand readiness activities that support it. Not with the Baby in the manger, we start at the End of the World, the completion of God’s plan, apocalypse on a cosmic scale, God’s reign *now*, mature Christian life in full communion with God, the revealing of Christ. Corinth’s problem was that they didn’t appear to be waiting for much. Their charismatic gifts had become “great things we can accomplish,” rather than “what God will do through us.” Paul has to remind them twice just in these 6 verses that they are waiting for the revealing of Christ.

Maybe “end of the world” is inaccurate. For the historical Jesus, what Mark wrote in 70 CE described real events. The resurrection, for instance, was an apocalyptic event for early Christians, as was the destruction of the Temple and fall of Jerusalem, which had just taken place for Mark’s readers. It *felt* like the end of the world. But apocalypse is ambiguous. It can apply to more than one set of events, because apocalypse is seen as the appropriate realm in which God works. And God is always at work, just as there are always forces in active rebellion against the reign of God. That’s what apocalypse is—rebellion against the reign of God. The message of apocalypse is that things will get worse before they get better, but hang on, God will set things right. *That* kind of end of the world. We cannot leave apocalypse safely in the Bible and think it makes no demands on us. Especially during difficult times like ours, we need to hear the message of apocalypse: the imminence of judgment, and better times ahead. It’s a message we’re given in order to be faithful people of God in our own time. Would you live differently if you thought someone more powerful than Santa was watching?

So, how does this help? *How* do we wait? You’ve probably spent enough time in waiting rooms to know that out-of-date magazines and the periodic announcement, “Doctor is running a little late” are not enough. Our Advent waiting has to be more than enforced idleness before we get to the purpose of our visit. Jesus makes his point with a parable about a man who left on a journey, leaving his slaves in charge. Their only instructions are to do their work and stay awake. Just “be alert.” It’s about being prepared. I’m told that Nancy Reagan kept a bag packed with travel necessities, ready to join Ron on a trip at literally a moment’s notice. *That* kind of prepared—be alert to changes in the program, know what you need, and have it ready for when the moment comes.

The problem is suffering. Jesus begins today's talk by saying suffering happens first. Then comes cosmic signs and the completion of God's plan for creation. That doesn't exactly make me want to dive in and work toward it. But *suffering* is not the goal. God's justice and righteous living and steadfast love *from us* is the goal.

On Friday night, I overheard two women at the Eastminster warming shelter talk about how rough it is to be homeless with kids. They had heard about some non-homeless people who had experienced homelessness for a weekend and discovered what hard work homelessness is. The homeless women pitied these "homelessness tourists" and were almost condescending toward them. "After what we've been through," they said, "we can handle anything." The "tourists" weren't strong enough to survive in their world where, although things are tough for them now, they'll turn around. Justice will be done. They can wait.

How we wait is what's at stake. The future is *not* all mapped out, and that's because *what we do* counts in God's plan. Paul says we are *partners* with Christ. Theologically, we can be confident that God's future is ultimate, we just don't know the details. I wonder about Jesus' parable of the man who went on a journey. How long was he gone? How long can the slaves stay awake? What happens if they fall asleep before he comes back? We don't get those details. What we do get is a warning to live in expectation. But it's in Biblish, and the trick is getting from that Biblish to daily life.

My recommendation for you is two words: practice Advent. Wait, but not like the doctor's office when "the doctor is running a little late." Wait like my brother in the boat, putting on the bait, throwing in the line, having a net handy. What you do while you wait for God's goal has an impact. My brother knows that sometimes the fish will bite on minnows, sometimes they're only biting on Hula-Poppers. He tries different baits, goes to different spots, fishes at different depths—all for the same hoped-for result. He's aiming for fish, *how* he fishes is not all mapped out.

We know God's goal is the redemption of all creation. What we don't know is the specific events on the way to accomplishing that goal. We don't even know what "redemption" means for "all of creation." All we've been told is "love God, love your neighbor," and there are a thousand readiness activities to go with that. From reading today's texts, we do know that we've been given gifts to strengthen us to meet the challenges that come along the way to that goal. We know that God is faithful. We know that staying alert counts, our bags packed like Nancy Reagan. The two women I overheard were as grateful for the challenges of homelessness, as they were grateful they'd met those challenges. Grateful. Because of the challenges, they believed they were stronger. They felt blessed, because God had gotten them through so far. That is waiting in expectation, friends—to choose to look for God in all of life's situations. It takes practice to trust God in all circumstances. What these apocalyptic texts today tell us is to develop that trust *now*. Practice active waiting now. Act as if God's reign of justice and right-living is already come because *you* are living righteously and you are protecting the vulnerable and feeding the hungry and you are treating others with respect regardless of their appearance. The future is not completely mapped out, but the end is. God's invitation to us today is to join in bringing that end to completion. That's why it's not all mapped out. What we do counts in God's plan. You make a difference. We are invited to be partners in God's plan.

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