

The First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

Four members of our congregation experienced a significant crisis in their lives this week. It was a crisis that caused several of them to lose sleep for a few nights and to have difficulty concentrating on other things during the day. The crisis occurred Wednesday evening when it was time for them to take their final examination on the Bible after their first semester in confirmation class. I am pleased to report that all four of them passed the exam. But from the time they took it until I called them the next day to disclose the results, they were, to some extent at least, in crisis.

One of the confirmation class requirements is memorizing the names of all sixty-six books in the Bible. As we were reviewing those books one evening, we came to the end with 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. The students got all the way through Jude, but the last book of the Bible gave them some difficulty. They kept trying to tell me the last book was Revelations, and I kept telling them it wasn't. After several minutes of mounting frustration, one of them finally got it right. She said, "Revelation."

The students found it curious that I was so fussy about whether you call it Revelations or Revelation. So I explained it to them. When you mistakenly give it the plural name Revelations, you are implying that the book contains many different revelations about the end of the world. Unfortunately, that's how a lot of religious people today regard the book. They see it as chock-full of information in secret code about communism and international political conspiracy and sexual immorality. They attend lectures and buy commentaries and engage in study groups because they think they can find secrets in the book that will give them superior foreknowledge about how and when the world will end.

All of that, of course, is sheer rubbish. It is not a book of Revelations. It is the book of Revelation. The very first sentence of the book begins with these words, "The revelation of Jesus Christ..." It isn't a book of geopolitical predictions. It's a book of eschatological imagery disclosing that no matter how bad things get in the world, Jesus Christ is still in charge, and in the end he will bring righteousness and peace to all who are faithful. It is not a book of many revelations

about politics; it's a book of one revelation, namely that Jesus is ultimately and unshakably Lord over all.

People who misread the book of Revelation as predictions about history would do well to read the rest of the Bible too, especially today's Gospel. Jesus says quite clearly to the disciples, "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Then Jesus goes on to describe the sudden shock 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." He concludes, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

According to Jesus' own words, nobody can predict the future. But these same words raise another question. What exactly does Jesus mean when he says that the Son is coming at an unexpected hour? Jesus already came to earth when he was born in Bethlehem, so he is not talking here about his first coming. After the resurrection he ascended to the right hand of God. Is Jesus talking about some sort of second coming when the world ends? Many people have interpreted these words to mean just that. Jesus came to earth and then he left, but he will come back again, they say. But what about the time in between? Jesus is gone. He is not here. He has abandoned us. We are completely on our own, it would seem. All we can do is get ready for the second coming.

The trouble with this sort of teaching is that it puts us in the position of ignoring the present in order to get ready for the future. It makes us accountable in the end but does nothing to help us in the living of our days until then. It places a heavy moral obligation on us but offers no assistance in the meanwhile and affords us no relief when we fail. It burdens us with the duty to be good but does not take into account the times when we fail to be good. The effect of this teaching therefore is to crush people with moralism rather than to free them for life with God.

Much that is taught about the second coming of Jesus is bad news, not good news. It is discouraging, not encouraging. It is binding, not liberating. And that is precisely the reason why the church must take a bold stand today over against this wrong interpretation. The second coming of Jesus must be understood the way the Bible intended it to be understood. Perhaps the clearest and simplest portrayal of what the second coming of Jesus really means can be found in the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

Matthew begins his Gospel by telling of Jesus' birth. In chapter one he describes Jesus as Emmanuel. Emmanuel is a Hebrew word that means God-with-us. Then in the last chapter of his Gospel, in the very last verse, Matthew reports these final words of Jesus: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

Do you get it? For Matthew, Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, from beginning to end. It is not that he comes, then leaves, and then returns again. He is with us *always*, because that is his character and his mission and his promise.

But today's Gospel is also taken from Matthew, and in it Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man. How does this square with Jesus being with us always? Once again the answer may be found in the larger context by reading the rest of Matthew, especially the chapter that follows today's Gospel. In the twenty-fifth chapter is the story of the final judgment when Jesus declares that as you have fed, clothed, welcomed, and cared for the least of your brothers and sisters, so also you have done all this for Jesus himself. The people in the story are surprised. They are shocked to learn that Jesus was never absent at all, but actually present in their neighbors. You see, it is not Jesus' sudden arrival that surprises the people. What surprises them is the disclosure that Jesus was present *all along*.

Disclosure. That's what revelation means. And disclosure is the key word in understanding the doctrine of Jesus' second coming. The doctrine of the second coming is simply poetic language that describes the disclosure of Jesus' presence in our midst every day of our lives, whether we recognize him or not. It is not a matter of sitting around and waiting for Jesus to return. It is a matter rather of seeing Jesus in the brothers and sisters around us right now. If you ignore and trample on your neighbors today in your eagerness to be religiously prepared to welcome Jesus tomorrow when he returns from heaven, you will not be prepared at all. In fact, you will miss him entirely. For if you do not see him *now* in the least of these, your brothers and sisters, you will *never* see him descending from his throne in heaven.

In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel describes his experience as a Jew in Nazi concentration camps. He tells of seeing a frail youth hanged. Because of his small size, he did not die immediately but hung at the end of the rope in sheer agony for nearly thirty minutes. As the other prisoners watched in horror, someone muttered, "Where is God now?" Wiesel says that at that point he heard a voice within himself

reply, “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gal-lows.”¹

What Wiesel experienced in that moment is what the Bible means by revelation. Wiesel did not receive a theological solution to the problem of innocent suffering and death. He did not receive a blueprint for how things would turn out all right later on. He did not receive an agenda for the geopolitical developments that would occur in the days ahead. What he received rather was a disclosure of God’s presence in that very moment. What he received was what Matthew meant by Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the season of preparation. But for what exactly are we preparing? Christmass with all of its feasts and parties and gifts and family reunions? No, Advent is more than that. Are we preparing for the birth of Jesus? No, Jesus was already born nearly two thousand years ago. Are we preparing then for Jesus’ second coming? Yes, in a way we are, but in another way we are not. We are preparing for a heightened awareness of how Jesus is *already with us*. We are preparing for a new level of consciousness about all the ways Jesus shows up in our lives each day under the guise of our neighbors in the world. We are preparing for the increased faithfulness that sees Jesus not only in the manger in Bethlehem but also in the upper room and on the cross and on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after Easter. We are preparing for the revelation—that is, the full disclosure—of Jesus in the joy and the sorrow, the laughter and the tears, the comedy and the tragedy of our daily lives here and now.

Originally preached in 1995

1. Wiesel, Elie, *Night*, Bantam Books, 1960, pages 61-62.