

A Kingdom Worth Waiting For
A Sermon on Luke 21:25-38
First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2021

Introduction

Advent is from the Latin word *adventus*, which means coming. There are three comings of Jesus that we celebrate during Advent. First is the expectation of the Second Coming, which is the topic today on the First Sunday of Advent. Then, we have the memory of the ministry of Jesus, which we observe on the Second and Third Sundays with gospel texts that feature John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord. Finally, we have the memory of the birth of Jesus, which we celebrate on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. That is when Advent transitions to the Christmas season.

The waiting is the point. It teaches us to be patient and it fills us with expectation. We are hoping that Jesus will bring the kingdom with him.

First Move: Standing Tall Before the Son of Man

Today's text is the last third of the discourse that is known as the Little Apocalypse. We talked about the first third two weeks ago. The gist of that text is that we can't predict what shape the new age will take. Our call as followers of Jesus is to have confidence that God is at work fashioning something new through us and through the people who have been historically oppressed.

In the middle third of the speech Jesus talks about the persecution of the disciples and the destruction of Jerusalem. Now Jesus expands the focus to the whole world.

Jesus says there will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. These heavenly bodies were worshiped as deities by all the nations except Israel. The nations see their gods collapsing. Israel's god is exercising power over them.

The effect on earth is terror. The stress of the nations is compounded by the sound of the surging sea. The sea was seen as an elemental force, more powerful than anything else on earth. The seas have reverted into chaos and are threatening the nations. People will stop breathing from fear and dread of what is happening.

Then the Son of Man appears, coming on a cloud with power and great glory. The Son of Man is a figure in Jewish eschatology, first in Daniel 7, then again in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, two books that were written in the intertestamental period. They

describe the Son of Man as a supernatural being who comes from heaven to judge all people and to rule the world as a human being.

The fear that grips the nations is a recognition that the Son of Man has come to judge them. Fortunately, the Little Apocalypse, as it appears in the three synoptic gospels, does not further describe the punishment that the nations will receive. That is not the concern of the gospel writers.

The emphasis instead is on how the followers of Christ should react to the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus tells his followers, “Stand tall and lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near.” Redemption is a payment made to release a slave or a captive. It could either be for forgiveness of their sins or for liberation from their oppression by Rome.

Jesus then tells the disciples a parable about a fig tree. The fig tree is used in the Old Testament as a metaphor for the peace and prosperity of Israel. The verses in Micah [4:3-4] that speak of swords being beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks go on to prophesy that the people of Israel shall sit under their own fig trees. Jesus says that the point of the parable is that the budding of leaves on the fig tree is a sign that the kingdom of God is near.

The Son of Man is a sign that points to the kingdom. The climax of the Little Apocalypse is not the coming of the Son of Man, but the coming of the kingdom.

Jesus follows the parable with an Amen saying: “Amen, I say to you, that this generation will certainly not pass away until all [these things] [will] take place.” The gospel writers were certain that they were living in the generation in which all of these things would take place and that they would personally witness the coming of the Son of Man and the coming of the kingdom.

The Little Apocalypse closes with an exhortation about how the disciples are to conduct their daily lives. Do not get drunk or paralyzed with anxiety. That day will come on you suddenly as a trap that springs upon an animal. Luke emphasizes the universality of the coming judgment: that day will rush in upon everyone who is sitting upon the face of all the earth.

The emphasis is on how the disciples are to conduct themselves in the in-between times. The disciples are to stay awake at all times and to pray for the strength to escape these things. The speech concludes with a reaffirmation that the disciples can stand confidently before the Son of Man when he comes in judgment.

Second Move: Reinterpreting Jesus in the Image of Caesar and David

One of the miracles of the Christian movement is that it didn't end when the kingdom didn't come. Paula Fredriksen, a Jewish New Testament scholar, writes in

her book, *When Christians Were Jews*, that when the kingdom was delayed, the followers of Jesus turned to Jewish scriptures with renewed emphasis, looking for meaning about the Christ event. Their study of the scriptures led them to express and refine ideas about the Messiah and the ways that Jesus fulfilled, or would fulfill, that role.

Jesus would still inaugurate the Kingdom, but to do so, he would have to come back. The novel messianic idea was that the Messiah would come not once but twice. The novel social idea was that the community, even without Jesus, would continue his proclamation and mission, which was to prepare Israel for the coming of the kingdom. The Messiah would come once in weakness and once in power and glory. Jesus as Messiah would establish God's kingdom at the Parousia.

The early followers of Jesus brought in military traditions from secular Greek. The Greek word for coming is *παρουσία*. In secular Greek, it means the arrival of a king into a city. It was a great ceremony with speeches flattering the king and magnificent feasts. The early followers of Christ, by using the word *παρουσία*, are suggesting that Jesus is the rightful king, not Caesar.

Parousia is an imperial term. We should be suspicious of imperial language, while recognizing that it is an important part of our tradition. Instead of rejecting it altogether, we should look to reinterpret it, to deconstruct and reconstruct it, so that it can be good news today.

The nature of the Second Coming also was colored by much older scripture about David. The early followers of Christ were living in an age of Jewish eschatological texts. Not all the texts had an apocalyptic messiah, but when an apocalyptic messiah did show up in eschatological texts, he was a son of David.

The problem is, David was a warrior. That is the most certain thing we can say about the historical David. He conquered the Canaanites and established the kingdom of Israel. The expanse of Israel's land was at its height under David. Warrior traditions about David fit poorly with Jesus, whose activities were those of a prophet and wisdom sage. The Davidic traditions, which were military, began to fill out the expectations of the earliest community.

The followers of Jesus were remaking Jesus in the mold of Caesar and David. Jesus would be a military figure when he returned. Jesus comes the second time around as a cosmic warrior. That is the Jesus who is described in the Book of Revelation.

Luke in today's text refers to the Parousia as "that day." In the Old Testament, that day would have been the Day of the Lord. The earliest images of Yahweh were as a warrior god who delivered the people of Israel from their enemies. The Exodus

is about God's liberating the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh was the mightiest king of his day. Yahweh alone defeated the mighty Egyptian army by swallowing them up in the sea.

The Day of the Lord was intended to give hope to the Hebrew people. Israel was a tiny country, surrounded by empires. Israel had no hope of defeating the empires in battle. Israel trusted in Yahweh to deliver it from its enemies.

The Day of the Lord evolved over the centuries into a hope that God would judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous. We see this in 2 Maccabees 7, which took place about 170 years before the birth of Christ. Seven brothers and their mother were martyred because they refused the Seleucid king's command to eat pork. This is the text that is the foundation of the Apostle Paul's understanding of the Resurrection of the Dead. God would intervene supernaturally to resurrect the righteous dead so that they could live out the rest of their lives. The dead are raised at one time, not one at a time, as each person dies. When Jesus dies and is resurrected, Paul says it is the first fruits of the resurrection of the dead.

Early Christians conflated the Son of Man, the Messiah and the Suffering Servant. According to Fredriksen's analysis, Jesus appeared during his earthly ministry as the Suffering Servant. His followers concluded from their study of scriptures that he would return at the Parousia as a warrior Messiah and the Son of Man, bringing in the kingdom violently and judging all people.

Both of these elements--the Day of the Lord and the Son of Man--were part of the eschatology of the early followers of Jesus. They hoped that Jesus would return in glory to liberate them from the Romans. They had no hope of military victory. They believed that God would intervene supernaturally to defeat the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel. They also hoped that Jesus would act as judge to separate the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the wicked. Kings were judges. Jesus the ultimate king is the ultimate judge.

Third Move: A Kingdom That Is Always Coming

The kingdom is not the problem. We long for the day when all people will have enough, when all people will live in peace with each other.

The Second Coming is the problem. In Revelation you have to wade through rivers of blood to get to the New Jerusalem. The emphasis shifts from facing the Son of Man confidently to destroying everyone who is not a follower of Jesus. John Calvin calls everyone who is not a follower of Jesus an infidel who rightfully deserves the wrath of God. The Gospel becomes triumphalistic, as well as anti-Semitic. The oppressed become the oppressors.

Jesus throughout the Gospels points to the kingdom. It is the coming of the kingdom that matters, not the Second Coming of Jesus. Jesus is a messenger not the message.

John Caputo, a contemporary theologian, describes the cross as the essence of the kingdom in his book, *The Folly of God*. It is the *first* coming that points to the kingdom. The kingdom is about the folly of the cross. It is a kingdom without power as the world knows power. It is power that is persuasive not coercive.

The problem comes when we literalize the kingdom. Caputo says that the kingdom is not a place in historical time. The world never experiences the kingdom in all its fullness. It is an ideal that we can only approach, a horizon that we never reach.

The kingdom is what we are dreaming of, what we are praying for, what we desire with desire beyond desire.

The kingdom does not exist in historical time; it calls. It is a call to live unconditionally, to offer unconditional mercy, hospitality and forgiveness. The kingdom stands in constant judgment over anything finite and conditional.

The kingdom has values that we can only approach—values like democracy and justice.

Democracy is always a democracy to come. No actual existing democracy can embody true democracy. Existing democracies are messy. They have partisan conflict. They are dominated by the powerful, who too often get their way, while the weak suffer. Democracy is always coming, like a Messiah who never shows up, but who keeps on disturbing us in the middle of the night with the promise and threat of his coming.

True democracy is based upon true justice. It is the law that has all the power—the institutions, the courts, the police, the militias, the jails—while justice is a call whose voice is too often ignored. The law is what exists, what is actual, effective, and real, while justice does not so much exist as insist. Justice without the law is impotent; the law without justice is a tyrant.

The Messianic call of justice intrudes upon the present, disturbing and interrupting it, haunting and spooking it, soliciting and destabilizing it, with its unfulfilled expectation for justice for the least among us.

Our understanding of the kingdom evolves. God is still speaking. Democracy today includes world democracy, when all people work together to address global problems such as climate change, the refugee crisis and the lingering effects of colonialism. Justice today includes economic justice, racial justice and environmental justice. Our vision of democracy and justice evolve as the voices of women and

people of color are heard and their perspectives are included. People of good will and diverse perspectives can and should debate what true democracy and true justice look like. God will lead us nearer to democracy and justice through this struggle.

Conclusion

The kingdom is always worth waiting for. It is always a kingdom to come, and it cannot come unless people are responsive to God's call. Advent is about preparing us for the coming of the kingdom.

We pray each week, "thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." As Christians, we believe that Jesus showed us God's will during his earthly ministry. When we act on that, when we respond to God's call, then and only then will we draw closer to the kingdom.

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