

Eschatology: Living Life in the Meantime

First Sunday of Advent

Luke 2:25-36 Jeremiah 33:14-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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November 29, 2009

A few moments ago, during the Time With the Children, I mentioned that today marks a new year on the liturgical church calendar. We have just completed the long season of Pentecost, a time that primarily focused on the role of the church and our place in it. But even before our Thanksgiving Day dinner is fully digested, we now enter into a new season called Advent.

The purpose of Advent is to help us prepare not just for the birth of Jesus, but also for the coming of Christ. This dual purpose is reflected in the assigned lectionary scripture passages. For instance, each and every year on the First Sunday of Advent, the assigned lectionary scripture passages deal not with the birth of Jesus, but with something we call **eschatology**. **That's a fancy theological term for the study of the end times, the ultimate destiny of humankind.**

In Christianity, the understanding of the end times are thought to have begun with the life and ministry of Jesus, who ushered in a new era marked by the living of life in the Kingdom of God in the here and now. This doctrine of the "last things," according to traditionalists, also involves what has been termed the "Second Coming" of Jesus sometime in the future, a time when God will bring to completion God's purpose for humankind.

Many North American Christians today have one of two main attitudes about the New Testament teachings of eschatology: either they feel little concern about the coming of the Kingdom of God at the end of time (many of whom don't believe in it in any literal sense anyway), or they are preoccupied with it, believing in an imminent apocalyptic end of the world as we know it (like as portrayed in the new movie 2012).

This year's customary apocalyptic text that begins Advent comes from the gospel of Luke. Reading this passage divorced from the whole of the gospel, as I did just a few moments ago, gives the impression that the author believed in an imminent "second coming" – that Jesus would return soon at any moment. This sets the wrong context for the gospel of Luke, however, and potentially a misunderstanding of who Jesus was for this author.

Since the understanding of eschatology is so important to the message of Advent, we are obligated to understand as best we can the eschatology of Luke, which indeed is different from the other gospel writers, and from Paul.

It is crucial to understand that the devastating scene described in our given passage this morning from Luke 21 has *already* been fulfilled. It is not a picture of the future, but rather a description of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE.

Luke has Jesus predicting this catastrophic event, which took place after Jesus' death, but was already history when Luke wrote his gospel. In other words, the first "coming" had already come and gone. Now, from Luke's place in history, there is to be an interim period of time of unknown length in which the church is to live as God's people until Christ comes again (the second "coming").

This shift from imminent to indefinite eschatology affected Luke's theology and ethics – as it should ours.

An **imminent end of time** brings extreme ethics. If the end is near and inevitable, the only thing left to do is to ready *oneself* to be on the right side of God's judgment. As it turns out, **this leads to a somewhat individualistic, self-centered approach to living life and a life of faith**, and it has a focus on trying to "save" others. (I'll save the entire notion of God's judgment, by the way, for another sermon.)

An **indefinite eschatology**, on the other hand, supports **an ethic that is engaged not with oneself, but with the world**. No longer expecting their or their children's lives to be interrupted and the world as they know it brought to an end, Christians had to figure out how to live in the meantime – that in-between time between the "now" and the "not yet."

The eschatological aspect of Advent cannot be forgotten, as it is the promise of a future that informs our understanding of how we should live life now.

So during the season of Advent this year, ask yourself what you will do to help share and promote the Kingdom of God. And may we all live in the light of the current and coming Kingdom of God, where all God's people receive and extend forgiveness, reach out to those in need, promote peace and justice, are constantly surprised by God's grace, and celebrate God's goodness in open table-fellowship and genuine love of neighbor. We have entered into the season of Advent.

Amen.

Resources:

National Religious Campaign Against Torture, "First Sunday of Advent."
The Pastor's Bible Study, Vol. One, Session 13: Faithful to the End.