

To Be Continued?

Mark 13: 3-8, 28-37

Much of the buzz around Jesus was the question, “Is this it?” Is this the Messiah coming to usher in the end of history or at least the end of Roman domination? Jesus’ disciples asked him about when the events of the end would actually happen, in today’s passage from Mark 13. In response he tells them five things:

1. The ongoing cycle of life that includes war, natural disasters, famines, and plagues will continue
2. Their generation will experience all of these, but they are not signs of the end
3. This life is like labor, giving birth to a new life that is emerging
4. They must always be vigilant (keep awake) because the consequences of our actions can come upon us at any time.
5. It’s impossible to know now when the end will come.

Interest in, and even concern about, the end of time is as evident today as it was 2000 years ago. For Christians, this interest and concern tends to be wrapped up in what we call the “second coming” of Christ. The Greek word *parousia* literally means “coming” or “expected coming”. Though it is not limited to the coming of the Messiah, in most Christian usage, it refers to a future coming of Christ.

The language of *second coming* includes phrases as: *apocalyptic* literature, the Rapture, and the end of the age. Belief in the second coming of Jesus, is a belief grounded in a very specific style of prophetic writing called apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature is always very dramatic. There are exotic and dangerous creatures and, ultimately, the universal battle of good vs. evil marking the end of the world

Apocalyptic prophecy has two main features. The first is personified cosmic dualism. There is a good god vs. an evil god and these gods both are personified. They have the characteristics and appearance of persons.

The second feature is that the apocalyptic view of life in this present age, controlled by evil, is pretty pessimistic. The only hope lies in the destruction of this age and the coming of a new and good age. There is no way to bring this new creation into being except through intervention by God. Christian belief in a “second coming” of Jesus seems based on the belief that Jesus did not accomplish all that needed to happen while he walked the earth two thousand years ago. New Testament writers expected an “imminent, dramatic, visible return of Christ to usher in the New Age” and culminate the work Jesus began in his earthly life and ministry.

Apocalyptic writing began in the land of Persia with the religion Zoroastrianism. It spread to Judaism during their period of exile at the hands of Babylon and Persia, emerging as a belief in another Exodus, another divine deliverance in the future called *The Day of the Lord*. The Jews began to hope for, then to expect, a re-establishment of the kingdom of David and the redemption of God’s promises to Israel. As the years passed, growing closer to the time of Jesus, this expectation became a belief among many that a personal Messiah would come as the agent of God’s deliverance.

Apocalyptic writing transferred to Christianity and then to Islam. The term “second coming” does not appear in the Bible per se. The closest reference is Heb. 9:28 (so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.)

The term “second coming” was coined by the early Christian leader Justin Martyr (ca. 150 CE). There has never been a single pattern of Messianic expectation. Different camps have different scenarios. Today, among evangelical fundamentalists, the popular theory is called *Premillennialism*.

These are the basic tenets of premillennialist theology:

1. The Rapture is the first step. God literally snatches all the faithful (usually defined as born-again Christians) from the earth for safekeeping during the devastating seven-year period of tribulation to follow.
2. Without their positive presence, the world will slide into moral decay and depravity, though some 144, 000 (12 x 12) will be converted during that time.
3. A leader will emerge to unite the earth in a one-world government – a leader who for 3 1/2 years seems to hold great promise, yet who becomes the Anti-Christ. The second 3 1/2 years will be a time of great tribulation and suffering.
4. This seven-year period will conclude with a great battle, probably nuclear, with all the armies of the earth massed against Israel on the northern plain of Megiddo, an ancient battlefield. This battle Armageddon will result in the destruction of many cities and people, and at its height, Christ will return to begin a thousand year reign.
5. Satan will be bound for this thousand-year kingdom and those who died faithfully during the tribulation will be raised. A new temple in Jerusalem will be built and the faithful will rule the earth with Christ from that temple.
6. At the end of the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, Satan will be released from bondage and again seek to defeat the armies of the faithful. Christ will then destroy the earth by fire and “God will create a new heaven and a new earth.”

The word apocalypse means “vision” and apocalyptic writings are often set in the form of a vision. Apocalyptic works are often ascribed to a famous person, such as with the Revelation to John. They often, though not always, involve a messiah figure. They are speaking to their own time with a message for that present age. These works are not a prediction of far future events, but an interpretation of the present and near future.

Apocalyptic literature tends to appear at times of great distress in which people feared the end of their world. Such was the case in Israel’s Babylonian exile and during the period of Roman domination into which Jesus was born. In our time, interest in eschatology seems to have risen following World War II in response to the nuclear threat, communism, and a universal paradigm shift – the transition from modernism to post-modernism. The world continues to change at an amazing rate and many people respond to such change by retreating to apocalyptic vision.

Jesus’ teaching was quite different from the perspective of apocalyptic writing. Jesus taught that God’s new creation was a present reality that was in the process of becoming in his age and in his world. He taught that God’s “kingdom” was actually breaking into the present age in his own life. This in-breaking “kingdom” was brought on by the transformation of persons internally that was bringing about the transformation of societies and the entire world. Jesus’ teaching offers a very different vision than that offered by the interpreters of apocalyptic prophecy today.

In reality, the purpose of apocalyptic literature in the New Testament is to reassure those suffering persecution and experiencing tribulation that the fledging Christian church would survive the great tribulation of Roman persecution. It was offering these followers hope and the assurance that God is ultimately God. Paul and other New Testament writers pointed to this as

God's purpose: that the persons and societies of earth be transformed not according to Roman law, Roman values, and Roman peace, but rather according to the values of God, the values taught by Jesus, the values of justice.

Now is the time in this sermon for me to equivocate. I cannot tell you that the interpretation of eschatological theology so popular among many Christians today is absolutely false. Maybe it's not. I can tell you that only a small part of Christian literature is apocalyptic. Traditionally, very little of the Christian message involved the second coming of Christ, though it seems clear that many of the New Testament writers expected Jesus' coming in glory. During these days, however, second coming theology has become a major point of Evangelical Christianity and, by extension, of the Christian message in the world today.

Examples of apocalyptic theology such as the *Left Behind* series represent either fanciful fiction or poor theological scholarship. Beginning with poor scholarship does not lead to good results a positive theology, or a healthy faith. In extreme cases, some believers actually encourage Middle East conflict as a movement toward a literal Armageddon, the ultimate war between the armies of good and evil, in the belief that this will expedite Jesus' second coming.

Eschatology theology tends to foster an "us against them" focus on retribution: "God's going to get you," rather than a movement toward reconciliation. It fosters a denial of God's intimate presence in the world now, seeing God rather as waiting above clouds, keeping score, and getting ready to march on earth to annihilate all who are not genuine believers.

Focusing on the second coming tends to distract Christians from continuing Jesus' ministry of bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed." One Christian writer referred to this distraction a hundred years ago when he wrote, "our religion makes its followers *inhuman*. It isolates them instead of merging them with the [rest of humanity], Instead of harnessing them to the common task, it causes them to lose interest in it." (Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Liliu Divin*)

We cannot afford anything that distracts us from our "core business" as followers of Jesus and as partners with the Holy Spirit. Paul and other New Testament writers really expected Jesus' to come back, end the age, and usher in the Kingdom of God in their lifetimes. That was 1950 years ago. As the years passed, it became clear that Paul was wrong, at least about the timing. Two generations after Paul, the author of the New Testament book 2 Peter was trying to reassure his readers that God would still keep that promise. Two thousand years later, many are still anticipating that coming and telling people it should be "any time now". Like Paul, they appear to be mistaken. It is time for us to release this past, to embrace the present, and create the future. Theologian John Dominic Crossan offers this wisdom: "whatever details we give about the human future are *usually* wrong, but whatever details we give about the divine future are *always* wrong."

Jesus and Paul proclaimed a new age coming whose coming has already begun. The new age has begun and its coming involves us – you and me. It is a partnership of God and people.

We are called to be agents of transformation in this world by embracing the Holy within ourselves and by living in communion with each other. We are called to be God's partners in transforming our own lives and transforming the world. Our task is to midwife the birth of a new age characterized by *shalom*: divine connectedness and peace.

What are you and I doing, individually, to make the world a more just place, a place of hope and hospitality? How are we reaching out to form community with the untouchables of our world. How are we seeing the poor and being present to the broken among us? Those are big questions and I offer only two simple thoughts toward an answer. First, *second coming* theology

reminds us that the time is now to live the way we ought to live, the way we want to live deep down inside. Two, our part in bringing in the new age depends on how we utilize our own talents and life choices. Dream extravagantly and act positively! Imagine the possibilities and put your plan into action.

When we live this way, we will discover the truth that, what we have believed by faith, we will know by experience, that the reign of God is already living within us. “Thus says the Lord,” writes the prophet Isaiah, “No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new thing, even now it comes to light; can you not see it?”

O God, who set before us the great hope
That your Kingdom shall come on earth
And taught us to pray for its coming,
Give us grace to discern the signs of its dawning
And to work for the perfect day
When the whole world shall reflect your glory;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Percy Dearmer)