

Online Bible Study
December 7, 2008

Dear Friends,

This Sunday is the second Sunday of Advent. Each year during this season of waiting for the light of God to break into the world, of expecting Christ's birth, of yearning for God's presence in our lives, the lectionary turns to apocalyptic and eschatological texts. Right when the mood outside grows cheery, the stories we read on Sunday morning get pretty grim! Last Sunday we heard about Jesus' returning in a cloud of glory with a two-edged sword shooting out of his mouth. This week we'll hear about the earth itself *melting* upon his return.

Apocalyptic literature is a biblical genre distinguished by its mysterious allusions to the signs preceding the events to occur in the last days of world history.

Eschatology is the area of Christian theology concerned with the "last things" with God's redemption of the world and the close of history.

Our reading this week comes from the NT letter 2 Peter.

2 Peter 3:8-14 from the NRSV

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

And from the Message

Don't overlook the obvious here, friends. With God, one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself on account of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He's giving everyone space and time to change.

But when the Day of God's Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration, earth and all its works exposed to the scrutiny of Judgment.

Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but we'll hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness.

So, my dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. Interpret our Master's patient restraint for what it is: salvation.

2 Peter was written in the early second century decades after the Apostle Peter, its fictive author, had died. This was a common convention in the ancient world. Letters were often written under the name and authority of a respected historical figure. 2 Peter was probably written by a disciple or student of the Apostle's. It intends to remain in keeping with his thought. This would have been understood by its original audience.

The first-century Jewish worldview that Jesus was born into had begun to frame its hope for the restoration of God's relationship with Israel in increasingly apocalyptic terms. Late Old Testament writes began speculating about terrors and woes that would precede the Messiah's arrival, convulsions in nature and a final judgment that separated the wicked and the righteous.

Christ's own preaching reflects some of this background, we heard it in the lesson from Mark's gospel that Lauren preached on this past Sunday. The earliest Christian community then saw in Jesus' death and resurrection the beginning of the end of time. When the very first churches were formed their people gathered together in the confident expectation that the world would soon end with Christ's return.

As the years went by people grew tired of waiting. Some Christian teachers moved away from eschatological thought. 2 Peter is written to confront this change. Its author hasn't given up on the hope that Jesus will return soon, to usher in the close of history.

And so, in this week's passage he counsels patience and makes an interesting suggestion: perhaps what the early Christians see as God's tardiness is actually a reflection of God's patience. In other words, they think they are waiting for God. But, perhaps God is waiting for them to repent, to straighten up their acts, to prepare themselves for his arrival. "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." Perhaps, rather than the early church waiting for God, God is waiting for the early church.

All of this is sort of interesting in a historical sense, but contemporary liberal protestant Christians have moved far away from a literal reading of the Bible that calls for us to crane our necks and stare at the heavens waiting for Jesus to drop out of the clouds. We affirm an eschatological faith every time we celebrate communion ("Christ is born, Christ has died, Christ will come again") but I doubt that many

Hills Church members actually expect Jesus to return in their lifetimes.

So what sense can we make of a reading like this one? Is it possible to “demythologize” the second coming? Personally, I don't want to completely jettison the belief that God will someday redeem history and conclude time, but biblical teaching on this topic is so heavily overladen with myth and poetic language it is hopeless, I think, to try and interpret this kind of scripture with any degree of literalness. Reinhold Nieburh once wrote that passages like this one are “highly symbolic forms of expressing confidence in the ultimate meaning of history.” In other words, we're heading *somewhere* and God will decide when the journey ends.

I am content with this, and content to refrain from speculating about how or when the trip might end. I trust that we are in God's hands.

But what about the meantime? I think it makes great sense to consider Christ's return to our lives not as once-in-history event that will conclude at the end of time, but instead, as something that is happening all the time. We spend much of our lives waiting for God, longing for fulfillment, hoping for excitement or satisfaction, an end to our pain and meaning in our lives. And sometimes we receive these things. And then, for whatever reason, because we don't hold on tightly, because we get distracted, because such gifts are fleeting, we lose our sense of God. And we start waiting again. I think that 2 Peter's advice about how to wait, and his suggestion that perhaps God is actually waiting for us, has a lot to say about how we might live our lives today. I look forward to exploring these ideas with you on Sunday morning.

God bless you,
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