

“THE COURAGE OF HOPE”

Rev. Dr. Floyd W. Churn

November 29, 2009

Scripture: Luke 21:25-36

How many Presbyterians are itching to hear a sermon on Eschatology...the doctrine of end times, the last things, the consummation of history? Maybe a phone-in poll?

The late comedian George Carlin did not leave us preachers much material suitable for pulpit use; but Tom Long, in one of his books on preaching recalls one of Carlin's observations about these call-in polls that you see on CNN or Fox or other cable stations. A controversial issue is presented, a position declared, and callers can phone in their views, whether they agree or disagree with the position. Carlin notes that in these polls, there always seems to be about 18 or 19 % that respond, "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." Now these calls are not free – they cost a dollar to make, and here they are they're voting "I'm not certain." Carlin imagines someone seeing the question posed on the TV screen and saying to his wife, "Honey, give me that phone" and boldly saying into the receiver: "I don't know." Then turning to his wife and saying proudly, "Sometimes a man's got to stand up for what he believes he's not sure about."

So here's the poll: What do you think about the passages in the Gospels that speak about the Day of the Lord, the wrap-up of life as we know it, the consummation of history, the second coming of the Christ? Are they important for living the Christian life of discipleship? Yes? No? I suspect the response of many Presbyterians...and Christians in general would likely be "I don't know...I'm not sure...but *why* do we begin the Advent season with such bizarre images as these?" Here are signs in the solar system, distress among the nations, the roaring of the seas, and the shaking of the heavens. But it's not only average pew-sitting Presbyterians who don't know or aren't sure about all this – the preaching of eschatology, the doctrine of last things, has been all but absent from mainline Christian pulpits for over a century. Taking up these texts has been left to the extreme literalists, the Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* of the 1970's and the *Left Behind* series of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

Most mainline churches, including our Presbyterian Church USA have moved far away from a literal understanding of these scripture passages, and especially any interpretations that would suggest knowledge of timing and details and personal destinies within these predictions, as have been put forth in the recent and more distant past. For example, the 1840's are known as the decade of "The Great Disappointment"; so many were so sure that the signs and world events were all in place for the Second coming of Christ. A Baptist minister, William Miller, predicted with confidence that the year would be 1844, while another minister, Samuel S. Snow, went even further to identify the date as October 22nd of that year. There is a universal curiosity about the unknown future and a fascination with how things might end; that fascination, nurtured by fear and anxiety, is what draws people to such movies as the just-released 2012, an end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it date drawn from the last year of the Mayan calendar.

There were, and still are, premillennialists and postmillennialis, who believe that the 1000 years mentioned in Revelation 20 are either pessimistic times of tribulation leading up to the Christ's return (pre-) or optimistic times when the church has been empowered to do the work of Christ, build the kingdom on earth, until his return (post-). There are amillennialists, who take the 1000 years not literally but pointing to the spiritual rule of Christ in individual lives until the Last Day, whenever that may come. Beginning in the late 1800's, the notion of inevitable human progress began to replace a belief in a Second Coming or a Day of Judgment brought about by God's

intervention; we will steadily create a better more humane world by our best efforts. This optimistic faith in humanity got blown to pieces on the European battlefields of World War I. Yet others believe that human history is neither headed somewhere nor will it be brought to a climactic end by God's intervening act; it is rather simply a neutral stage on which individual and national dramas are played out for better or worse.

If you are interested in exploring these different views of eschatology, there are some wonderfully informative links within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) website, which I will include in the printing of this sermon and its posting on the Woods website (<http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/worship/millennia.pdf> and <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/eschatology.pdf>).

For the most part, Presbyterians practice a certain restraint in speaking of matters surrounding the end time and the second coming of Christ, consistent with Jesus' words in Matthew: "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."¹

Now Advent is the season of preparation for Christ's coming, which we think of, quite rightly, as the birth of the holy child at Bethlehem. Yet Advent has always contained a second meaning of Christ's coming, pointing to his coming again as God completes the redemptive work that God began in Hebrew history and in the birth of the Messiah. We are much more ready to hear of the first coming than the second, and congregations tend to be understandably confused when the lectionary text for the 1st Sunday of Advent relates these apocalyptic events as we heard from Luke's Gospel today. But one of the primary messages of Advent is that we live in an eventful "in-between" time...between Christ's comings, back then and yet to come, between the "already" and the "not yet" of God's pivotal interventions in the world. It's a time of waiting for something to happen that we do not and cannot manage or control. We all know about that kind of "out-of-our-hands" waiting: waiting for an economic recovery, for the end to a war in a far-off place like Afghanistan, the safe return of a loved one from such a war, the results of a biopsy, the reconciliation of a once-near-and-dear friend, after countless interviews an offer of a new job to end a long season of unemployment, a phone call or e-mail from a child long unheard from.

The question that Advent poses is this: if life is characterized by waiting for something significant to happen to us and to our world, do we wait in hope and assurance or in anxiety and fear? Advent opts for hope, despite all those terrifying images in Luke of signs of distress, the shaking of the heavens, the chaos and the tumult. Those signs suggest this hope is no naïve hope that assumes everything will go smoothly but a tenacious hope that holds us fast through all the distress and disruption that we know now and will know, according to Luke, before the final day of God's triumph. The end for those who resist the priorities of God's kingdom will be destruction, but for those who embrace these kingdom values as known supremely in Jesus Christ – redemption. "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We live in hope because we know how God's story ends, and in J. Christian Beker's words, that end provides us "the motivating and beckoning power of God's final triumph." I like the way that Parker Palmer expresses the same notion in his book, *The Active Life*:

"Every life is lived toward a horizon, a distant vision of what lies ahead. The quality of our action depends heavily on whether that horizon is dark with death or full of light and

¹ Matthew 24:36.

life. When we imagine ourselves moving toward the finality of death, our action may become deformed. We may become paralyzed, unable to act freely. We may become driven by fear, obsessed with protecting and preserving what we have, which is a sure way of losing it. With death on our horizon, we may act in ways aimed at getting it over with, ways that lead to self-destruction now simply because destruction seems inevitable. But when we envision a horizon that holds the hope of life, we are free to act without fear, free to act in truth and love and justice today because those very qualities seem to shape our own destiny.....The question of whether we are moving toward death or new life is the central question of most religious traditions.”ⁱ

Jesus gives us a horticultural image of life, not death to reveal the future: “Look at the fig tree...seemingly dead in winter’s cold...but look, the first green leaves sprout and you know that summer is already near.” That future of God that is finally redemption, not death, arcs back, shines back into our life in this in-between time and gives us the courage of hope. Faith in the present springs from a belief in the future – and we have God’s promise “My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention.”ⁱⁱ So we live in a trajectory of hope, regardless of all that resists God’s purpose in our world. We live alert and watchful, not in the sense of anxious worrying over every moment, whether it might be the last, climactic moment, but being attentive to every sprout and sprig of God’s new life around us and actively engaged in God’s work. Neither caught up in the extreme pleasures of the world nor immobilized by the worries of the day. The realities all around us that seem so grim and so entrenched need not weigh down our hearts, because they are not the final realities. And so...

- We can take the risks of **love** in hope, loving one another and especially those the world considers unlovable, because we know that in the end God’s love will triumph over every form of hatred or callous disregard.
- We can be **peacemakers** in hope and bold confidence, within our communities and within the world, because we know that peace and reconciliation are the ways of God’s future and that no violence or alienation will finally have a foothold in God’s kingdom of peace.
- We can be **servants of our community** for Christ in hope, tending to the needs of its people, knowing that these acts of kindness and support are not just isolated gestures but part of a kingdom quilt of caring that will finally and fully blanket all of God’s people.
- We can engage our energies and passions for **justice** in hope in a world all too marked by inequities great and small, because we know that the kingdom of God that will not stand for injustice will dominate in the end.
- We can nurture every impulse and every movement that enhances **life** in hope, because we know that in God’s triumphant kingdom, death, so dominant in our world and with so many brutal faces, has no future.
- And we can act with the courage of tenacious **hope** in these in-between times because the Advent promise emboldens us as we wait and work for the promised fulfillment of God’s intentions for all of his children.

What do we think of these passages about the end times? Yes?...No?...Not sure? I suggest we embrace them, not in literalistic detail or curious speculation as to the timing and circumstance, but as sure signs that the God of love who began it all in creation and redeemed it all in the gift of Jesus Christ, will complete his purpose whenever and however the final chapter is written.

David Lose, of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, writes:

From Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr., history is full of examples of those who, because they had been to the mountaintop, had peered into the promised land, and had heard and believed the promise of a better future, found the challenges of the present not only endurable, but hopeful. We, too, amid the very real setbacks, disappointments, or worries of this life, can “stand up and raise [our] heads” because we have heard Jesus’ promise that our “redemption draws near.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring*. (Harper, San Francisco, 1990), p. 139.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 46:10

ⁱⁱⁱ As found on workingpastor.org, lectionary for November 29, 2009.