



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JANUARY 25, 2015
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

I Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20
Pardon Me, Paul

*“The appointed time has grown short . . .
the present form of this world is passing away.”*

It was, perhaps, only twenty-five or thirty years after Jesus first issued the invitation to Simon and Andrew, James and John, and the other disciples to follow him that Paul was advising the Christians in Corinth to focus their attention and energies on Jesus’ return. We cannot deny the fact that every sunrise brings us one day closer to Christ’s return, but what does that mean for our lives today? I admit that I often do not know what to do with Paul’s emphasis on the immediate return of Jesus. Obviously it did not happen as he thought it would. When I read such comments by Paul, I think of the multiple attempts made through the years to predict Christ’s return. Only four years ago, Harold Camping predicted the world would end on May 21, 2011. When it did not happen, Mr. Camping revised the date to October of that year. He died at the age of 92 in December 2013 . . . and Jesus has not yet returned.

Understandably, the Apostle Paul believed Jesus’ return was immanent and personal preparation for the consummation of the age was of utmost importance. Many Christians believed Jesus was coming back soon because it seemed logical. Had Jesus said, “I will return in a few thousand years,” what effect would that have had on the first believers? Instead, Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus said some of his followers would not experience death before his return (Matthew 16:28; Mark 9:1). Therefore, Paul and his fellow Christians had every reason to believe they were living in the “in-between time,” a period bracketed by what Christ had already done and by what was yet to be. As Leander Keck once explained, living in this in-between time was “somewhat the way participants in a new administration live between election day and inauguration day.”¹ What is going to happen has been made clear, but we are not quite there yet.

¹Leander E. Keck, *Paul and His Letters. Proclamation Commentaries: The New Testament Witnesses for Preaching*, Gerhard Krodel, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 81.

Because Jesus has “tarried” for well over nineteen hundred years, we, too, live in this in-between time. But should we who are married live as if we are not? And should those who are single remain so? Can we who mourn suddenly ignore our sorrow or should those of us who have reason to rejoice simply stifle our glee? How do we deal with the world as if we have no dealings with it? What was Paul thinking and what does living in this in-between time mean for us? Are we to live with our eyes on the skies as if we have no other obligations or relationships on earth? As the day of Christ’s return inches closer, should we simply sit and wait?

Lest we find ourselves in the embarrassing and detrimental predicament of prognosticators like Mr. Camping, perhaps we should heed the cautionary words of scripture offered in the Epistle of II Peter. Also speaking to early Christians, the writer acknowledged that some nonbelievers scoffed at the notion of Christ’s return because nothing had yet happened. He also reminded them that God is Lord of heaven and earth and would accomplish all things in his time. Then he advised his readers:

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. II Peter 3:15b-16

In other words, the writer warns, be careful that you do not expound on things you do not understand. Taking the advice of scripture, I admit that I have no clue, from scripture or otherwise, as to the timing of the end of the world as we know it. I do know, however, that Jesus called his first disciples and all subsequent disciples to follow him in a particular way of living out the gospel. I also know that the Apostle Paul followed Christ in that very manner and encouraged everyone he discipled to live with a daily consciousness of Christ in their lives.² Furthermore, Paul distinguished his advice to set aside all relationships and obligations in order to live as if Christ were coming back any moment by stating that these were his opinions and not direction he had received from God (I Corinthians 7: 25). Above all, Paul was talking about a new understanding of our relationship with this world. Our spouses are not only earthly companions but sisters and brothers in Christ. When we mourn, we do so with assurance that our grief will not last forever. When we rejoice,

²Donald Joseph Selby, *Toward the Understanding of St. Paul* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 20-21.

we understand that all good things come from the hand of God. Our calling is to re-think our relationship with all of life and to live as if the kingdom of God has already come among us . . . for it has!

Therefore, whether Christ returns in the next five minutes or no sooner than the next five thousand years, our commitment as followers of Christ does not change. We are to continue to respond to Jesus' call to "repent . . . believe in the good news . . . Follow me" by proclaiming the Good News in word and in deed.

Jesus was the master of the turn of phrase. When he was talking to fishermen about joining him, he promised he would make them "fishers of men." Had they been carpenters like himself, he might have said, join me and become "builders of believers," or to people working in the fields he might have offered to train them to be "farmers of faith." The point is that he attracted the first disciples because he indicated that he would use their unique talents and abilities to share the Good News of God's love and care for all people. And that is exactly what he did.

Even if we knew with certainty that Jesus would return within the next five years or the next year or even the next month, there is no time for us to sit and wait for the end of the age. Our calling has no expiration date. There is no contingency clause—even for Christ's return. There is too much to do. You saw that group of children leave the sanctuary earlier. They need us to teach them what it means to follow Jesus. The young people in our congregation need us to help them figure out the particularity of their calling. Those of us in the middle years need encouragement and support as life constantly changes around us. And the more mature among us need the care and companionship of the rest of us as the path of discipleship grows shorter.

We cannot spend our time gazing into the sky looking for Jesus because Christ is calling us into the neighborhoods of our community. On Friday I attended the funeral of a young man who was killed a week ago. I did not know him but we all know his uncle who works with us here. I knew very few people at that funeral, but I know that every one of them is my neighbor. I saw a lot of tears. I heard shouts of praise in affirmation of the reminder that God will see us through this dark time. And I saw a lot of stoic faces on young men so frightened by life that they will court death day after day. They need us to fish for them, to build for them, to farm for them. They need us to

live out our calling in a way that will lead them back to life. I do not know what that path is, but some of you may. God is calling someone to walk that path.

We do not have time to sit around and wait for Jesus to return because Jesus is calling us to follow him into the business community. Does not this community have a reputation for being an entrepreneurial wonderland? Granted the times were different, but the businesses, banks, and corporations that grew up here decades ago did not happen simply because of prevailing economic conditions. It takes ingenuity, innovation, vision, and courage to build successful businesses at any time. What if we added the power of the Gospel to that mix? What if women and men in this community, inspired by the Spirit of God, pooled their resources in order to create new businesses that provided needed goods and services and, above all, well paying jobs for our neighbors? Economic stimulation is a challenge. What if it became a ministry as well?

There is no time to wait on Jesus to come again because Jesus is already calling us to improve education, provide quality healthcare to all people, guarantee neighborhood safety, and strengthen the common interests that bind us as a community. Rarely has there been a group of people as mismatched as the twelve folks Jesus called to work with him. There were many stumbles, missteps, and failures along the way to the cross, but eleven of them made it and courageously took up the ministry Jesus handed to them. We would not be in this place today if they had remained in the upper room after his death waiting for Jesus to return. When the power of God's Spirit came upon them, they rushed out to share the Good News. They took the Gospel into the streets of Jerusalem and from there spread out across space and time to make a difference in the lives of their neighbors. Imagine the things we could do if we put our minds and hearts to it! Imagine what we could do if all believers in this community united in resolve to follow Jesus in making life better here! Imagine what could happen if we stopped waiting for God to do it all and realized that God is waiting on us to do it with him!

We do not have the luxury of biding our time until Jesus returns because our world is in anguish from the pain and terror that grows day by day. God has gifted us richly with talents and abilities and we know what Jesus expects us to do. He has called us to follow him and share the Good News.

Jesus wanted us to be ready for his return but to be ready in a way that maximizes the Good News that he came to proclaim and live. Even when

Jesus knew the cross was before him, he never stopped living day by day. He never stopped caring for people day by day. Jesus never stopped looking for ways to better the life of all people day by day. Jesus shared God's love day by day.

We live in this in-between time in the very way Jesus called us to live in the first place. We live as people gifted to change the realities of this world, not by spreading fear of a cataclysmic end to the world; rather, we live as people of hope knowing that God transforms the world through us. We began our worship with a prayer of St. Richard of Chichester. We would do well to end our worship and begin our service with it as well:

Day by day, dear Lord of thee three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
To love thee more dearly,
To follow thee more nearly,
Day by day.

St. Richard of Chichester (1197-1253)

So may we. Amen.

January 25, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

There are times, O God, when we wish that we could fall into your arms and feel the comforting and assuring embrace of your love. There are times when our confidence is weak, our hope has dissipated, and our resolve is non-existent that we need to tangibly feel your nearness and encouragement.

And just when we think you have all but abandoned us, a friend calls, a note arrives, we notice the sunny face of a jonquil peaking out of the cold, wet earth, and we sense your nearness in ways that we cannot fully understand. Thank you, O Lord, for the many ways you embrace us in the arms of your love.

We pray that you will wrap your healing arms around each of us who is ill or wounded or struggling with disease. Bring the skilled hands of physicians who know best how to treat us. Touch us with the compassionate hands of nurses who know how to care for us. Hold us with the strong and gentle hands of family and friends who love us.

Wrap the arms of your mercy around our community so that we might feel the power of your transforming love. We are tired of violence and death. We are weary from poverty and overwhelming need. We are irritated by those who complain but never offer any constructive help. We are indignant over those who spew their hatred and bitterness into the public square without ever claiming their hurtful words or recognizing the pain they cause. Hold us in the strong arms of your transforming love and make of us a better community than we are right now. Give us the courage and ingenuity to live out the Gospel in this place and to create a new community of your love.

Embrace us in the arms of your mercy, O God, so that we might gladly walk with you through this journey of faith, never doubting your love, always confident of your presence, always enlivened by your grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.