

In the interim

December 6, 2000

"Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28).

We live in between the first coming of Jesus Christ and his second coming, and most of us feel a lot better about the first one. Christmas is about a baby, after all, and that makes everything easier. We know about babies, and so we know how to domesticate Christmas. We set up a crèche, pin up a wreath, set out a poinsettia or two. Maybe we sing "Away in a Manger" with the alternate tune. Altogether we figure out how to manage Christmas so that the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay won't end up scaring anybody.

But the second coming is something else. As Karl Barth said, we can't fathom the Second Advent of Jesus Christ, and we stammer when we try to speak of it. I think I know what Barth meant. Part of our problem is that the Bible describes the return of our Lord in literature that is hard to interpret. The literature is apocalyptic—which means it's an unveiling of the world that lies behind this world. It's a revelation that tells about the transition from this age to the next.

But the transition is rough. It's so full of emergency. According to the gospel scenario, everything breaks loose at the return of Jesus Christ. Nations go to war, and civilians run for cover. There's blood in the streets and famine in the fields. The earth shakes and the sea roars. There are signs in the sky above, panic on the earth beneath, stars falling, people dying of fright—it's a whole drum roll of disaster.

And then, in the midst of all the confusion, people will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." He's the incoming Lord. He's the oncoming Lord. He's got power to judge and power to save, and when he comes the second time he will be too big to miss. At the end he's "God without disguise," as C. S. Lewis once wrote—God without disguise who comes at us so unmistakably that he will "strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature."

It's the climax of the human drama. Christ coming to finish what he started. Christ coming to gather his saints and vindicate his martyrs. In this event—we Christians

confess—in this climactic event all the hopes and fears of all the years come together one last time.

So why does the second coming make some of us squirm? What is it about this topic that makes us uneasy?

One problem is that we don't know how to read the literature, and, in particular, we don't know how literally to read it.

Another problem is that the church has been expecting Jesus to return for a long time, and he hasn't done it yet. "It's hard to stand on tiptoe for two thousand years," says William Willimon, and so after a while people settle down. People settle into a kind of "everydayness in their faith," and they quit scanning the horizon.

The way this plays out for most Catholics and confessional Protestants is in a kind of interim faith, a common-sense Christianity that stays fairly close to the ground. We don't deny the big, booming events such as the second coming, but we don't think about them very much either. We've still got church and sacraments, after all; we've got scripture and prayer; we've still got the golden rule and the Ten Commandments. We've got Christian pop music to make us feel right at home in the world. And every week we faithfully spend some of our money and time on kingdom causes. That's ground-level Christianity, and it's just enough religion to keep us going.

Why does the second coming make us restless? We have trouble with the literature, as I said. Also, we can't figure out God's schedule. I'll propose a third reason. A lot of us have been secularized enough by now that our view of the world has flattened out, and the Second Advent of Jesus Christ doesn't fit into a flattened-out world very well. It's too fantastic, we think. It's too supernatural. In certain moods we think it's too embarrassing. It's an embarrassing advent, and so we leave it to those embarrassing Christians who have turned apocalyptic speculation into a billion-dollar industry—prophecy buffs with their computer charts and wrong predictions that are then folded back into new predictions in the kind of prophetic improvisation that Paula Frederickson calls "apocalyptic jazz." Prophecy buffs clicking away with their pocket calculators, and premillennial preachers who spin a Camp David peace summit in such a way that it appears to rise right off the pages of Ezekiel.

How alarming all this is. How alarming to read those bumper stickers that say, "Beam me up, Lord!" How distressing to see those four-color laminated placemats of

the Rapture, complete with wrecked cars and crashed jetliners! Some of us encounter such things in fellow believers, and we feel the way we do when we run into a sword-swallower at a wedding reception.

John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible but one. When he got to the last book of the Bible—the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, the book of whores and dragons and clashing empires—he read it and then put his pen back in his drawer.

But is it better to ignore the Lord's return? Is it better to live with a low ceiling over our lives, and no room there for the incoming Lord? We may be the sort of people Jesus warns about in Luke 21. Watch! says Jesus. Heads up! Be alert! Pray that you will have the strength to stand before the Son of Man! Jesus says this to people who have given up on the second coming and have settled into a ground-level religion. At this level their hearts get water-logged. Their hearts get "weighed down," as verse 34 says. Here are people of God who weigh themselves down with worldly anxieties, and then relieve them with worldly amusements. Jesus mentions drunkenness in particular. People worry, so they get drunk. They get drunk, so they worry. And that makes them want a drink. In the classic addictive cycle people try to relieve their distress with the same thing that caused it, and that's how they end up trapping themselves.

Watch! says Jesus. Be alert! Jesus says this because his return isn't an apocalyptic fireworks display. His return is the coming of the kingdom of God. It's the coming of justice in the earth. When the signs appear, says Jesus to a temple-full of listeners, don't give up! Don't freeze up! "When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Jesus is talking to people who know about redemption. These are Exodus people. These are passover people. These people have a history of being squeezed by Egypt, Babylon and Rome. To these people, redemption is the longing of their heart. They want Rome off their back. They want Caesar out of their hair. It's their dream. It's their passion. The coming of God's redemption means justice is coming, liberation is coming, the King of all the earth is coming. When biblical people want God's redemption they cry out: O God, rescue me. Deliver me. Bend your ear toward me, O God, and in your righteousness save me (Ps. 71).

Do we know anything about such passion? I'm thinking that when life is good, our prayers for the kingdom get a little faint. We whisper our prayers for the kingdom so that God can't quite hear them. "Thy kingdom come," we pray, and hope it won't. "Thy kingdom come," we pray, "but not right away."

When our own kingdom has had a good year we aren't necessarily looking for God's kingdom. When life is good, redemption doesn't sound so good. That's how things go. God's redemption is good news for people whose life is bad news. If you are a slave in Pharaoh's Egypt, or a slave in antebellum Mississippi, you want your redemption. If you are an Israelite exiled in Babylon, or a Kosovar exiled in Albania, you want your redemption. If you are a woman in modern India (it doesn't matter what caste you belong to) and your husband or fiancé doesn't think your family has come up with a big enough dowry, and if he locks you in a closet for three months or calls up his buddies and threatens to have them rape you and then kill you—I say, if you are a modern Indian woman in such a predicament, you want redemption from wicked sexism, and you want it with every fiber of your being.

According to scripture, the person who wants redemption wants the kingdom of God whether she knows it or not. And the coming of the kingdom depends on the coming of the King, the one who will return with power and with great glory. However we are to understand this apocalyptic event, whatever form it takes, the second coming of Jesus Christ means to a Christian that God's righteousness will at last fill the earth.

People with crummy lives want it to happen now. If you are a Christian in sub-Saharan Africa today, you don't yawn when somebody mentions the return of Jesus Christ. When the AIDS epidemic has devastated whole populations you want your redeemer. You want the one who has healing in his wings. Passionate Christians want the return of the Lord. And so do compassionate ones.

When our own life is sweet, we can look across the world to lives that aren't sweet. We can raise our heads and our hopes for those lives. We can weep with those who weep and hope with those who hope. We can look across the world, and across the room, and across the pew. It's natural to hope for ourselves, and how healthy it is to do it. But it's unnatural to hope only for ourselves. And how parochial it is to do it.

Be on guard, says Jesus, that you don't get weighed down with parochial anxieties and parochial amusements to relieve them. Be on guard against that fatal absorption with yourself! Take care! Stay alert! "Stand up and raise your heads

because the kingdom is coming.”

Jesus’s words are an antidote to our sloth, an antidote to our worldly cynicism, an antidote even to our scorn of prophecy buffs. Jesus’s words are meant to raise our heads and raise our hopes. Could justice really come to the earth? Could husbands quit beating up their wives, and could wives quit blaming themselves? Could Yasir Arafat and Ehud Barak look into each other’s eyes and see a brother? Could some of us who struggle with addictions or with diseases that trap us—could we be liberated by God and start to walk tall in the kingdom of God? Could Jesus Christ appear among us in some way that our poverty-stricken minds can never imagine in a scenario that would simply erase our smug confidence about where the lines of reality are drawn?

If we believe in the kingdom of God we will pray, and we will hope for those without much hope left. And one more thing, one more tough thing. We will work in the same direction as we hope.

In a wonderful book titled *Standing on the Promises*, Lewis Smedes says that hoping for others is hard, but not the hardest. Praying for others is hard, but not the hardest. The hardest part for people who believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ is in “living the sort of life that makes people say, ‘Ah, so that’s how people are going to live when righteousness takes over our world.’”

The hardest part is simple faithfulness in our work and in our attitudes—the kind of faithfulness that shows we are being drawn forward by the magnet force of the kingdom of God.

According to a story that Os Guinness tells, 220 years ago the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session on a bright day in May, and the delegates were able to do their work by natural light. But then something happened that nobody expected. Right in the middle of debate, there was an eclipse of the sun and everything turned to darkness. Some legislators thought it was the second coming. So a clamor arose. People wanted to adjourn. People wanted to pray. People wanted to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

But the speaker of the House had a different idea. He was a Christian believer, and he rose to the occasion with good logic and good faith. We are all upset by the darkness, he said, and some of us are afraid. But “the Day of the Lord is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord

is returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. I therefore ask that candles be brought.”

And men who expected Jesus went back to their desks and resumed their debate.

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