

sermon-12/7/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Living in the Meantime”
2 Peter 3:8-15a
By Jim Patten

Here we are in Advent, the time each year we wait for the coming of the Christ child. Strangely, our scripture for today points us to words about Christ’s Second Coming. This happens every year at the beginning of Advent. We will discuss why in a moment.

First it is important to know the New Testament had a variety of concerns about the Second Coming depending on the author. Scholars point to three main concerns. First, did we miss Christ coming again? That can be seen in Paul’s letters, especially First Thessalonians.

Second, what will Christ’s coming again look like? That is Mark’s concern in chapter thirteen of his gospel. And finally, what is taking so long? That is 2 Peter’s concern. The author of that epistle was writing a good deal later than Paul and the author of Mark. Most scholars believe it was written in the early part of the second century. Jesus had been crucified 70 to 100 years before this was written. What in the world is taking so long?

Of course, we who live 2000 years later might wonder the same thing. True 2 Peter says a day is like a thousand years to God. If that is so, it hasn’t been all that long for God. What are we complaining about? Some Christians can be accused of acting like young children on a family vacation repeatedly asking their parents, “Are we there yet?” Like those children some keep asking, “Is it time for the Second Coming yet?”

But, that may not be our most pressing concern. For many progressive Christians, believing in a literal Second Coming in the first place is very hard indeed. Certainly books like the *Left Behind* series have made any talk of the Second Coming unattractive for many of us. Even if those books hadn’t been written, talk of Christ coming out of the clouds to make things right in some supernatural way is difficult to believe literally.

What are we to do with these texts about Christ coming again? 2 Peter makes it very clear what we are **not** to do. Earlier in chapter three the author confronts those scoffers who deny any Second Coming. These are the cynical ones who say things don’t change. God’s promises don’t always come true. There won’t be any Second Coming. Consequently there won’t be any judgment either. We won’t have to answer for how we live our lives, so we might as well do what we please. Apparently part of doing what they pleased involved sexual promiscuity. 2 Peter says they indulged their own lusts.

Part of the trouble with these cynical scoffers was their arrogance. They acted like they knew exactly how God can, or cannot act, how God’s presence could, or could not change the world. In their sophisticated cynicism they thought they could understand and capture God by their own intellects.

Certainly this text is a warning to any of us who think we know what God can and can't do. Literalists can fall into this trap, but this is an especially dangerous trap for progressives who don't take the Bible literally. We ought to be warned not to think we can explain away every mystery or deny God's activity in the world because it doesn't fit the realm of what we deem possible.

Beyond that, how is this text helpful for us in our day? 2 Peter's audience was experiencing tough times. They knew persecution because of their faith. They lived with despair and fear. The Second Coming sounded like a welcome event to those who were desperate.

While our suffering is not on the same level as those early Christians, we are experiencing tough times worldwide. The economic recession is affecting many in this country and millions around the world. The violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Thailand, and so many other places is discouraging and painful. The threat posed by terrorists who seem to care little for life, even innocent life, is very troubling. All of these things can lead to cynicism and fear. Many people are experiencing their own personal tragedies due to illness, anxiety or grief that feel overwhelming.

My guess would be that we long for a transformed world, for a world where peace and righteousness will be at home. That is one of my favorite lines in the New Testament: "we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." We long for a world where justice is the norm, where relationships are healthy, where wars cease and no one is starving.

Even if we don't believe in a literal Second Coming, we can still believe when God's presence breaks into our world light and healing are sure to follow. We can believe that God comes again and again when the body of Christ, the Church, lives into its mission to be the hands and heart of Christ to a broken world. In some ways the Church is an imperfect expression of Christ's Second Coming.

Advent is a time to prepare our hearts to be transformed by God being born in us once again. As each of our hearts are transformed, the world experiences transformation in a fuller way.

The fire images in our passage in 2 Peter can be helpful. Fire destroys, to be sure, but fire also is a symbol of purifying. Advent can be a time for us to let God's presence burn away all that is dead wood in our lives, all that is peripheral, so we can spend our best energies on the really important things. Many of the entries in Newport's own Advent booklet speak to that in very touching ways.

One scholar, in speaking about our predicament, says, "In the meantime we live in this unrighteous realm as if we were already citizens of that righteous one" 2 Peter writes about. Advent can be a time to decide where our true citizenship resides. When we give our allegiance to God's kingdom we tend to be hopeful, not cynical. We tend to be open to those mysterious, often hidden, ways God touches our lives.

What do we do with the Second Coming? I suppose some will choose to wait for a literal event. That is certainly an option. Others will choose to see this in a less literal, more personal way as we wait to encounter God in this life and the life to come.

In the meantime we prepare our hearts to recognize God's coming into our world however hidden. In the meantime we hold on to the hope that God's ultimate purposes cannot be defeated. How that works out is a mystery to me. But, as one commentator says, if we abandon our trust that God's ultimate purposes will succeed, it will lead to "moral laxity or cynicism about whether there is any ultimate justice." That is certainly consistent with 2 Peter's message in our passage for today.

As we take communion on this second Sunday in Advent, may we let this meal nourish us as we continue in our preparation for Christmas, as we strive to live in such a way that we become true citizens of God's realm where righteousness is at home. Amen