

The Kingdom in All Its Fullness
A Sermon on Matthew 24:36-44
First Sunday of Advent
December 1, 2019

Introduction

As we move into Advent, a lot of folks in in the pews already have Christmas on their mind. They are fixed on the hanging of the greens, decking the halls and singing Christmas carols. Christmas is only a few days away.

The readings on the First Sunday in Advent point toward a different day. They are about the Second Coming. The Greek word is παρουσία—it appears twice in today’s text. It means coming or arrival; it is the first stage of presence. It is translated into Latin as *adventus*, which is transliterated into English as Advent. In secular Greek, it meant the arrival of a king into a city. It was a great ceremony with speeches flattering the king and magnificent feasts. The early followers of Christ, by using the word parousia, are suggesting that Jesus is the rightful king, not Caesar.

Parousia is an imperial term. We should be suspicious of imperial language, while recognizing that it is an important part of our tradition. Instead of rejecting it altogether, we should look to reinterpret it, to deconstruct and reconstruct it, so that it can be good news today.

First Move: The Birth of the Idea of the Second Coming

The early Christians had a problem. The core of Jesus’ message was, “Repent for the kingdom of God is drawing near.” When Jesus was resurrected, they believed that the coming of the kingdom was imminent. But the kingdom didn’t come. That was the reason that many Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah. The Messiah was supposed to bring the kingdom with him. Where was the kingdom?

Today’s Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 2 describes the kingdom. All the nations will stream to God’s holy mountain. That would have been Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The Jews will teach the Gentiles about God’s holy word. God will judge the nations, and they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither will they learn war any more. All people will walk in the light of God.

It is a beautiful vision, but when the Christian writings began to appear 15 years after the Resurrection, it was no closer to reality than it was in Isaiah’s day.

One of the miracles of the Christian movement is that it didn't end when the kingdom didn't come. Paula Fredriksen, a Jewish New Testament scholar, has written a new book called *When Christians Were Jews*. She argues that when the kingdom was delayed, the followers of Jesus turned to Jewish scriptures with renewed emphasis, looking for meaning about the Christ event. Their study of the scriptures led them to express and refine ideas about the Messiah and the ways that Jesus fulfilled, or would fulfill, that role.

Jesus would still inaugurate the Kingdom. But to do so, he would have to come back. The novel messianic idea was that the Messiah would come not once but twice. The novel social idea was that the community, even without Jesus, would continue his proclamation and mission, which was to prepare Israel for the coming of the kingdom. The Messiah would come once in weakness and once in power and glory. Jesus as Messiah would establish God's kingdom at the Parousia.

The nature of the second coming was colored by much older scripture about David. The early followers of Christ were living in an age of Jewish eschatological texts. Not all the texts had an apocalyptic messiah, but when an apocalyptic messiah does show up in eschatological texts, he is a son of David.

The problem is, David was a warrior. That is the most certain thing we can say about the historical David. He conquered the Canaanites and established the kingdom of Israel. The expanse of Israel's land was at its height under David. Warrior traditions about David fit poorly with Jesus, whose activities were those of a prophet and wisdom sage. The Davidic traditions, which were military, began to fill out the expectations of the earliest community. Jesus would be a military figure when he returned. Jesus comes the second time around as a cosmic warrior. That is the Jesus who is described in the Book of Revelation.

We see these military traditions seeping into the earliest writings in the New Testament, which are Paul's letters. Paul describes this cosmic battle in 1 Corinthians 15:24-27a:

²⁴ Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.

²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet."

Jesus at the second coming will arrive the way that a Davidic messiah was supposed to arrive: trumpets sounding, in command, conquering foreign gods and subduing foreign nations, victorious in power.

Second Move: The Parousia in Matthew

Matthew in today's text refers to the Parousia as "that day." In the Old Testament, that day would have been the Day of the Lord. The earliest images of Yahweh were as a warrior god who delivered the people of Israel from their enemies. The Exodus is about God's liberating the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh was the mightiest king of his day. Yahweh alone defeated the mighty Egyptian army by swallowing them up in the sea.

The Day of the Lord was intended to give hope to the Hebrew people. Israel was a tiny country, surrounded by empires. Israel had no hope of defeating the empires in battle. Israel trusted in Yahweh to deliver it from its enemies.

The Day of the Lord evolved over the centuries into a hope that God would judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous. We see this in 2 Maccabees 7, which took place about 170 years before the birth of Christ. Seven brothers and their mother were martyred because they refused the Seleucid king's command to eat pork. This is the text that is the foundation of the Apostle Paul's understanding of the Resurrection of the Dead. God would intervene supernaturally to resurrect the righteous dead so that they could live out the rest of their lives. The dead are raised at one time, not one at a time, as each person dies. When Jesus dies and is resurrected, Paul says it is the first fruits of the resurrection of the dead.

Matthew refers to the Son of Man three times in today's text. Early Christians conflated the Son of Man, the Messiah and the Suffering Servant. The Son of Man appears in Jewish eschatology, first in Daniel 7, then again in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, two books that were written in the intertestamental period. They describe the Son of Man as a supernatural being who comes from heaven to judge all people and rule the world as a human being.

If we apply Fredriksen's analysis, Jesus appeared during his earthly ministry as the Suffering Servant. His followers concluded from their study of scriptures that he would return at the Parousia as a warrior Messiah and the Son of Man, bringing in the kingdom violently and judging all people.

Both of these elements—the Day of the Lord and the Son of Man--were part of the eschatology of the early followers of Jesus. They hoped that Jesus would return in glory to liberate them from the Romans. They had no hope of military victory. They believed that God would intervene supernaturally to defeat the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel. They also hoped that Jesus would act as judge to separate the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the wicked. Kings were judges. Jesus the ultimate king is the ultimate judge.

Matthew says that the arrival or parousia of the Son of Man will be just as in the days of Noah. The days of Noah were a time of cosmic judgment. God destroyed the wicked and saved the righteous. Matthew implies that Jesus as the Son of Man will judge the wicked and the righteous.

No one knows when the Day of the Lord will come, not even Jesus or the angels in heaven. Matthew puts the focus on the unexpectedness of God's supernatural intervention. In the days before the Flood, people were going about the normal routine of their daily lives, eating and drinking, marrying and being given in marriage. They did not know the cataclysm of the Flood was coming until they were swept away by it. It will be the same way when Jesus returns as the Son of Man.

Matthew uses two other examples of the routine of daily life. Two men are in the field. These are most likely family members working together on the family land. Two women are grinding in the mill-house. This also is likely to be two women in the same family. Matthew's focus is on the ordinariness of daily life. Some people are preparing for the kingdom, some are not.

In each case, one is taken and one is left. The Greek word for taken can also be translated as accepted into or welcomed. One is accepted or welcomed and one is left.

Matthew closes with an exhortation: "Stay awake, since you do not know which day your Lord is coming." The Greek word for stay awake, γρηγορέω, is closely related to the word for resurrection. The root meaning of both words is to stand up, arise, get out of your bed. It is new life to be roused from your sleep. Γρηγορέω adds the sense of stay awake, be watchful, be prepared.

Matthew emphasizes the need to stay awake by telling a parable about a thief breaking into a house at night. This is an unlikely metaphor for Jesus. The point again is the uncertainty of knowing when a thief will break in. You must be prepared for the thief at all times.

Matthew adds a social dimension to the Second Coming, just as Fredriksen suggests. We do not know when Christ will return. What we do know is what we are supposed to be doing in the meantime, the acts of charity, forgiveness and peace that mark people of the kingdom.

Third Move: The Coming of the Kingdom Is What Matters

Fundamentalists take the mythology of the Second Coming literally. The *Left Behind* series uses today's text to illustrate that one will be taken and one will be left behind.

Progressives Christians tend to be embarrassed about the Second Coming. We embrace the social dimension of the Second Coming, that we should focus on what

we should be doing until Jesus returns. But we softpedal the return of Jesus in glory to judge the earth. We talk instead about the kingdom breaking in around us, to individuals and communities who practice what Jesus preached. We only get glimpses of the kingdom by ourselves or in small groups.

The Second Coming is more than that. It describes a time when the kingdom in all its fullness will be visible to everybody.

The kingdom is not the problem. We long for the day when all people will have enough, when all people will live in peace with each other. The Second Coming is the problem. It sounds more like a horror show than the inauguration of a peaceable kingdom. You have to wade through rivers of blood in Revelation to get to the New Jerusalem.

Jesus points to the kingdom. It is the coming of the kingdom that matters, not the Second Coming of Jesus. Jesus is a messenger not the message.

John Caputo, a contemporary theologian who is part of the Jesus Seminar, describes the cross as the essence of the kingdom. It is the *first* coming that points to the kingdom. The kingdom is about the folly of the cross. It is a kingdom without power as the world knows power. It is power that is persuasive not coercive.

In his book *The Folly of God*, Caputo says that the kingdom is not a place in historical time. The world never experiences the kingdom in all its fullness. It is an ideal that we can only approach.

The kingdom is what we are dreaming of, what we are praying for, what we desire with desire beyond desire.

The kingdom does not exist; it calls. It is a call to live unconditionally, to offer unconditional mercy, hospitality and forgiveness. The kingdom stands in constant judgment over anything finite and conditional.

Walter Benjamin, a German born Jewish philosopher from the early 20th century, speaks of a weak messianic power. The Messiah is not a superhero who comes to reward and punish. We are the Messianic people; we are the ones the dead have been waiting for. We are the ones that God has been waiting for. Instead of waiting for a strong Messiah who will bail us out, we are the Messianic people who will usher in the Messianic Age when we fully respond to God's call. The kingdom does not exist, it insists. It is an ideal that calls us to bring it into existence.

The kingdom has values that we can only approach—values like democracy and justice.

Democracy is always a democracy to come. No actual existing democracy can embody true democracy. Existing democracies have partisan conflict. Existing democracies are dominated by the powerful, who too often get their way, while the

weak suffer. Democracy is always coming, like a Messiah who never shows up, but who keeps on disturbing us in the middle of the night with the promise/threat of his coming.

True democracy is based upon true justice. It is the law that has all the force—the institutions, the courts, the police, the militias, the jails—while justice is a call whose voice is too often ignored. The law is what exists, what is actual, effective, and real, while justice does not so much exist as insist. Justice without the law is impotent; the law without justice is a tyrant.

The Messianic call of justice intrudes upon the present, disturbing and interrupting it, haunting and spooking it, soliciting and destabilizing it, with its unfulfilled expectation for justice for the least among us.

Our understanding of the kingdom evolves. God is still speaking. Democracy today includes world democracy, when all people work together to address global problems such as climate change, the refugee crisis and the lingering effects of colonialism. Justice today includes economic justice, racial justice and environmental justice. People of good will and diverse perspectives can and should debate what true democracy and true justice look like. God will lead us nearer to democracy and justice through this struggle.

Conclusion

Faith in the literal Second Coming is the faith of those with little faith, those who do not trust that the kingdom will come unless it is brought about by an all-powerful God who, in the end, rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked and the friends of God, the ones like us, win.

The true kingdom is always worth waiting for. It is always a kingdom to come, and it cannot come unless people are responsive to God's call. We pray without ceasing, may thy kingdom come.

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