

November 27, 2016

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 24:23-27,30-31,36,42-44

Luke 12:39-40

I Thessalonians 5:1-6

II Peter 3:8-13

Revelation 3:1-6

Do we ever expect to find truth mixed with error in this realm?

I do not think the earth is flat, though every biblical writer in both the Old and New Testaments believed it was. I do not believe that Sunday, October 23, 2004 B.C. was the first day of Creation, though that matches biblical chronology. Solid science knows far more about the realities of creation than ancient myths brought down to us from pre-Babylonian cultures that are older than Abraham. This is not obvious to everybody, though it is obvious to most people who come to this church. Getting into endless arguments with people who do not want to let solid evidence or rational thinking become part of their religious convictions is not our mission. We may not part friends, but part we must.

Among the great blunders – the great mistakes – of Christian tradition are the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming, and the claim that Jesus was God. These stand out as most damaging to the Message and Mission of Jesus. They are also clearly refutable, if we do not begin with the assumptions – like the inerrancy of the Bible – that many claim must not be challenged, even though such assumptions are relatively recent inventions and have no clear support or authority behind them.

Much of what we are about to read reflects the impact of apocalyptic thinking that was in vogue for two and a half centuries before Jesus came. That is, it did *not* come from Jesus. There is strong evidence that Jesus tried to shake His followers loose from apocalyptic beliefs but was unable to do so. Freeing people from the assumptions and prejudices that they start out with is not as easy as we want to pretend.

At the same time, it is clear that even Jesus' best friends did not understand most of what He was trying to teach and tell them – until after the Resurrection. After the Resurrection, the learning curve got steep. Yet some of the blunders went with the followers into their

writings and into their expectations, only slowly revealing themselves to be errors that did not match either reality or the major Message and Mission of Jesus. But since they are part of our canon Scripture, we continue to read them and wrestle with them. Sorting the wheat from the chaff is part of our pilgrimage – part of our faithfulness. Jesus, by the way, was doing that all the time. *“It was said to the men of old ..., but I say to you”* So there is more than one dimension to being sincere and earnest followers.

Matthew 24:23-27

If anyone says to you then, “Look, here is the Messiah,” or “There he is,” do not believe it. Impostors will come claiming to be messiahs or prophets, and they will produce great signs and wonders to mislead, if possible, even God’s chosen. See, I have forewarned you. If therefore they tell you, “He is there in the wilderness,” do not go out; or if they say, “He is there in the inner room,” do not believe it. Like a lightning flash, that lights the sky from east to west, will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Matthew 24:30-31

Then will appear in heaven the sign that heralds the Son of Man. All the peoples of the world will make lamentation, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. With a trumpet blast he will send out his angels, and they will gather his chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of heaven on every side.

Matthew 24:36

Yet about that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son; no one but the Father alone.
[So much for Jesus being God.]

Matthew 24:42-44

Keep awake, then, for you do not know on what day your Lord will come. Remember, if the householder had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. Hold yourselves ready, therefore, because the Son of Man will come at the time you least expect him.

Luke 12:39-40

Remember, if the householder had known at what time the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. So hold yourselves in readiness, because the Son of Man will come at the time you least expect him.

I Thessalonians 5:1-6

About dates and times, my friends, there is no need to write to you, for you yourselves know perfectly well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "All is peaceful, all secure," destruction is upon them, sudden as the pangs that come on a woman in childbirth; and there will be no escape. But you, friends, are not in the dark; the day will not come upon you like a thief. You are all children of light, children of the day. We do not belong to night and darkness, and we must not sleep like the rest, but keep awake and sober.

II Peter 3:8-13

Here is something, dear friends, which you must not forget: in the Lord's sight, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. It is not that the Lord is slow in keeping his promise, as some suppose, but that he is patient with you. It is not his will that any should be lost, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. On that day the heavens will disappear with a great rushing sound, the elements will be dissolved in flames, and the earth with all that is in it will be brought to judgment. Since the whole universe is to dissolve in this way, think what sort of people you ought to be, what devout and dedicated lives you should live! Look forward to the coming of the day of God, and work to hasten it on; that day will set the heavens ablaze until they fall apart, and will melt the elements in flames. Relying on his promise, we look forward to new heavens and a new earth, in which justice will be established.

Revelation 3:1-6

To the angel of the church at Sardis write: "These are the words of the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know what you are doing; people say you are alive, but in fact you are dead. Wake up, and put some strength into what you still have, because otherwise it must die! For I have not found any work of yours brought to completion in the sight of my God. Remember therefore the teaching you received; observe it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come upon you like a thief, and you will not know the moment of my coming. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not polluted their clothing, and they will walk with me in white, for so they deserve. Anyone who is victorious will be robed in white like them, and I shall never strike his name off the roll of the living; in the presence of my Father and his angels, I shall acknowledge him as mine. You have ears, so hear what the Spirit says to the churches!"

SCRIPTURE READING: A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

When will “the Thief” come? Only at the end of life on earth as we know it? That was barely around the corner to the early church. You know better. But they could not have known – not at first. So Jesus’ teaching about the Thief was hijacked and drawn into apocalyptic expectations about the Day of Judgment – the Second Coming that they already expected. [See the Supplement at the end of the sermon for more on this.] But the Thief comes for us at surprising times and in surprising ways. And in real life – not when it is all over. What will the Thief steal? Our souls, of course! What else would be valuable to Him? We need to wake up. Advent is upon us!

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A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

What does Advent mean to us today? Are we expecting any surprises? Do we have this “Christmas Thing” all figured out, wrapped up, choreographed, and buttoned-down so that we know exactly what to expect and what to do about it? Jesus died because of our alienation from God, so we give presents to each other and hang lights on trees, is that it? End of story? Then early in January we will go back to our same old familiar patterns. Maybe we will have had some good times and some tender moments, but we will not be changed, lifted, or redirected in any significant ways. Thus the world, and us within it, can go on in the same ways and toward the same ends like we always have. As long as we are in charge of our own lives, it is not rational to expect anything else.

If you want to keep these passages about the Thief irrelevant and make sure they have no meaning or message for you today, keep reading them as something about a Second Coming. Pretend that Jesus does not come in surprising or unexpected ways and times in your own personal and present life. Pretend that Jesus only comes when it’s all over here. How very comforting. How very convenient. How truly ridiculous.

It is anathema to lots of people to suggest that there may be errors built into the New Testament records as we now read them. It is anathema to me if you suggest there are not. What is the myth that most people carry regarding the early church? That EVERYTHING WAS CRYSTAL CLEAR TO EVERYBODY. Everybody knew exactly who Jesus was, everybody agreed about His Message and His Purpose, and they all knew exactly what to do about it. EVERYTHING WAS CRYSTAL CLEAR TO EVERYBODY. Jesus had no problem getting all His followers to see and understand everything He was trying to teach and reveal to them. Therefore, when the followers started writing their accounts of what had happened, there were no errors, there were no mistakes, there was no confusion. If you turn the New Testament records into a make-believe fairy tale like that, it will have little to do with you or the world you live in.

If that is what we believe, the Bible is very safe but very boring. We miss all the drama unfolding as Jesus' followers struggle to go on with their lives after the Resurrection. All the disagreements and contradictions go unnoticed because none of them can be admitted. Peter always agrees with Paul. Paul always agrees with Barnabas. Paul never learns or changes his mind about anything. We give everybody a neat, cheap little formula about how to be "saved," and then everybody lives happily ever after – except for the bad guys, who get thrown into the fire to suffer forever.

It is amazing to me that Christianity has survived as well as it has, when so much of it has been drawn off into this "sideshow" of mistaken assumptions. It is a tribute to the power of the Holy Spirit, and to the transforming reality of genuine relationships, that the life of faith communities have survived and thrived despite the bleakness and the blunders of so much bibliolatry. God's Messiah came to reconcile us to a God who truly loves us – who loves us beyond anything we ever dared to believe before. This does not match with a God who wants to throw us into eternal fire if we do not agree to constructs and formulas that other humans are making up in an effort to frighten us all into being good. Is fear really where goodness comes from?

If everything was NOT crystal clear to everybody, then the evidence of confusion, disagreements, and differing opinions about what to believe and what to do would be all over the New Testament. Which, of course, it is. And if we do not read the New Testament determined to blot out and ignore the real drama going on, then it becomes a "Living Word": an exciting record of the greatest pilgrimage ever offered to humankind – a pilgrimage taken to new dimensions by Jesus, and a spiritual journey still going on today. And it is not all cut-and-dried, like so many try to pretend. If Advent is still vibrant and alive for us, then we are still active participants. The drama is not over. The Thief is still coming in ways we do not expect, cannot predict, cannot control. The very authenticity of God's Messiah coming into our lives is revealed by the fact that we are not in charge; that we are not doing this for ourselves; that we are not the ones deciding when or how or what the outcome will be. We are scrambling to "follow" – not trying to tell Jesus or God what they have to do or what they have to mean.

Anyway, the humanly contrived, all cut-and-dried kind of Christmas is not my kind of Christmas. Perhaps it is no longer yours either. Okay, so I'm eighty-two years old. Do I still try to get the roads ready? Do I still want to make sure there is room in the inn: room in my mind; room in my heart; room in my schedule; room in my plans and purposes? Oh yeah, if I want Advent to come again. Do I still know that Jesus has the authority to make changes in my life: to give new assignments; to change my course; to refine my efforts and approaches? How can I pretend that Jesus is my Lord and Savior if I am still in charge of my own life?

It remains the greatest tension between the Christian Life and the American Way of Life that, if I am a Christian, I am no longer in charge of my life. Self-reliance, self-made men and women, and successful, rugged lifestyles are exhilarating and impressive. But they are not for people who go into the baptismal waters to die to this world – to die with Christ – and to be raised to New Life *by no power of their own*. In Christendom we do not boast about willpower or heroism or how we have overcome all obstacles by our own brilliance or prowess. In Christendom we value humility, speak about surrender, and admit our powerlessness. We do not convert ourselves. We do not find Jesus and drag Him into our lives to help us with whatever we have already decided to be doing. Jesus finds *us*. If any of us engineer our own conversion, it is a dud, a fake – a counterfeit pretense of spiritual awakening. We wait. We pray. We hope. We invite. We try to get ready, just in case. But we never know when the Spirit will strike. We never know when Jesus will come to us in true revelation and awakening. That is the kernel of real truth in the teaching about the Thief in the night.

We just read some of the “Thief passages” found in the New Testament. What do we learn from them? At the very least, it makes it clear that this was a favorite theme of the early church. Jesus will come as a Thief in the night. He always has. He always will. Not our timetable. Not our doing. We do not go find Him. He comes to find us. We never know when. It will always be a surprise. We don't even know for sure if He *will* come. But it is very important to get ready and to stay ready.

I just lost most of America, at least in terms of attitudes and opinions. But suppose someone were foolish enough to give me prime-time, nationwide television coverage for thirty minutes this Advent Season. I would lose all but a tiny handful of listeners inside the

first twenty seconds. Why? Because I am suggesting that Jesus is in charge – not us. Our religious life, our spiritual awareness, our relationship to God, our awakening to the dimensions beyond, our faithful response, the level of our gratitude and our love – it all depends upon Him, not on us. (“*[L]est any one should boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9; I Corinthians 4:7))

In former times, there were various brands and flavors of blasphemy. One was idol worship: bowing down before images of man or beast as if they were gods. Many believe that Jesus was crucified primarily because He and His followers thought His connection with God was too close – that the identity between the two was becoming blurred.

Many things have changed over the years. It is a very different world today. Yet some of the major themes have not changed as much as we like to think. We only make it *sound* a little different. What is the difference between *their* idolatry and *our* thinking we are in charge? The only reason humans make idols is so we can try to control the gods. We make images and try to find the right names so we can have more influence and ultimately gain control. We say “this pleases the gods” or “that displeases the gods,” and pretty soon we have it all figured out so we can wrap the gods around our little finger. Idol worship costs us effort and sacrifice, but it is worth it if we can gain some control and be in charge of the outcome. Or we can try to find a shortcut to the desired results – claim that we are in charge without all the falderal. It is called “atheism.”

Modern America has tried to move beyond the sovereignty of God, even though it pretends to believe in God. We *think* we are in charge: How religious I am depends upon me. How faithful I am depends upon my degree of commitment and obedience. I can decide to be converted whenever I want to. I can decide when to feel close to God, when to make the prayer connections, when God will speak to me; I can even steer the conversation around to just about whatever subject I want to talk about. My, me, mine – even “my God” and “God as I understand him.” Oh my! And even and especially, “MY goodness.” God is ours – we are not his. Isn’t that something clearly backward?

Jesus comes as a Thief in the night. Always has. Always will. We never know when. We never know if. We are not in charge. We cannot control Jesus’ coming or going. We can only get willing.

We can want it. We can try to be ready. But if we think we are in charge of Jesus, we have tried to turn Him into an idol. Many people will miss Advent again this year because they think Christmas is something they can control, choreograph, plan, make happen – in whatever way they choose, in any way they want to. They do not know that Advent is about waiting and watching and hoping. They do not know that God has to initiate all relationship between us. They do not know that prayer is waiting upon the Lord, instead of bossing God around. We live in a culture that thinks *we* can bring Christmas every year, in our own calendar time, in whatever way we want to, according to whatever sentimental themes and threads most please us at the moment.

Many will miss Advent again this year because they think they are in charge. They will “do” Christmas their way. They will get exactly what they put into it – no more and no less. And God will not be there because there is no room for God, and because God does not think it is appropriate to shove hard enough to *become* part of it.

Oh, God will still send the Messiah – in his own way and time. But Jesus comes like a Thief in the night. He always has. He always will. That is what all the stories say. Nobody could have guessed or imagined that Jesus would come when He did, in the way that He did. Actually, He came into our world even more quietly and subtly than the stories say. A few of the lucky ones and a few of the most aware picked up on it pretty early. Most never did. He was born, lived, died, and was raised again – and most did not even notice. Most do not notice even still. Yet He still comes as a Thief in the night. He still picks us off one by one – now here; now there. But you never know when or how. Burning bush; coal of fire; catch of fish; minding your own business on the way to Damascus. A love you did not expect. A purpose or a passion you did not even know you had. Some morning you are too slow getting off your knees to go do your own thing, and whammo! You never know. It is not our idea to become religious. The Spirit moves within. The Spirit reaches us. Everybody fights it at first – except for the pretenders. Modern-day Christmas is mostly for the pretenders.

Yes, I know. That is not the full story. There are a few – a handful, a remnant – who use Advent as a time of spiritual preparation. They mean all their Christmas preparations as an invitation, a humble request, a sheer statement of willingness to receive, should the Thief choose to come. And Christmas for them

is a time of gratitude; a remembering of the mystery and power of His coming; an honoring of all that the Incarnation means to those who have responded to His coming, to His loving us, to His choosing us.

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But what about the fear? There is always so much fear around His coming. When Messiah comes, what will He think of us? What changes will He make? In what ways will He be displeased? Will some things make Him angry? Can we imagine looking into the eyes of true justice and not feeling judged? Even if love is clearly surrounding us and forgiveness is clearly offered, can we imagine looking into the eyes of truth and justice and not feeling judged? I don't know about you, but with God, I do not fear punishment nearly as much as I fear God's look of sad disappointment. I am not crass clear to the core, any more than you are; underneath I really care. I do not wish to displease my God. *Anything* is preferable to that. And it is not just theory, is it? We know from *experience*. The old chant tolls: "God have mercy. Christ have mercy." Please, give me another chance. And He says, "Why else would I come?"

Lots of people will come to Christmas this year with no fear worse than the fear of buying an inappropriate Christmas present, or perhaps forgetting to get one and being embarrassed. Is that really what it's all about? Jesus died on the Cross so we could give each other trinkets? How tragic to expect so little.

Others, not wanting to miss all the thrill and excitement, will *drum up* a little fear. We certainly have a wide number of disasters to choose from: Oh the ecology is beyond repair! Oh it's the end of the age! Oh the economy will soon be impossible! Oh the fires of Hell! It's like a cheap-shot production of a horror movie; with a little effort and imagination, we can give ourselves the thrill of an adrenaline rush. But eventually we leave the theater and go home unchanged. Maybe we talk about it over coffee and have a nightmare or two as an aftershock, but nothing really happens. The day after Christmas, we are the same old people in the same old world. Fear can control us for a while, but it does not transform. At the first opportunity, we always revert back to who we really are. Yes, all the disasters really could happen. But we still revert back to who we really are *despite* all our fear, whether it is pretended or truly felt.

There are people, of course, who become so immersed in fear that they cannot function in ways we call normal. All of us know there are ways in which fear is shutting us down – keeping us from our true identity and destiny. Faith, we say – trust in God – is the only antidote. There is no intelligent person on the face of the earth who cannot entertain legitimate fears at any moment in time, no matter what their circumstances. Every one of you can picture disasters that really could happen to you, and to our world. They are not irrational or unreasonable. They are live possibilities. Every single one of you can go terrified any time you choose to focus on your fears. And there is absolutely no way to guarantee that what you fear will not actually happen. Fear is big and real in our alienated, broken world. Most of us spend a good deal of time and energy in this life trying to get ourselves into some position where fear cannot reach us. It is like trying to heal greed by giving it money. Sooner or later, we have to choose between fear and faith. Until then, fear governs our lives. We may not announce it out on the surface; we try not to act like it. Nevertheless, sooner or later, we have to choose between fear and faith. Until then, fear governs our lives.

Only, how do we choose faith if we have never met the Thief in the night? Isn't it interesting that our world surrounds the coming of the Messiah – the coming of this Thief – with dread and anxiety? For many people, “repent” no longer means “change” or head in a new direction or, most accurately, turn around and head for home. Today, most people think repent means “cower in shame and guilt.” How did Satan pull *that one* off?! There is nothing wrong with the word “repent” or with its true definition. How did it get turned around to serve the reverse of its rightful purpose?

For many people, the thought of “The Great Day,” “The End of the Age” and “The Second Coming” no longer means “Hallelujah! The Day of Light and Love has arrived at last – how wonderful to see Him face-to-face! How marvelous to move out of this veil of tears and lies and decay!” No, it means grovel and cower because the fires of Hell await. How did Satan pull that one off?

You know what? I actually know some people who read this parable in Matthew about the Thief in the night and go away from it thinking they do not *want* their house to be broken into. Can you imagine such a thing? Incredible! *“But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into.”*

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Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Matthew 24:43-44)

Jesus is teasing us! Don't we get it? He is talking to His friends. But He is still promising them that He will break in no matter how well-guarded they think they are: I'm going to reach you. I'm going to get to you. I know you really want me, no matter how you sometimes act – no matter how you sometimes protect yourselves against me. So “On guard!” I'm coming for you. Let's play hide-and-seek. You go hide – you always do anyway. I just want you to know I'm going to find you.

The true Christmas is spiritual hide-and-seek. He came into this world, and His own knew Him not. But He came anyway, and now He is after you – seeking you out. *“You did not choose me; I chose you!”* (John 15:16, 19; II Thessalonians 2:13-14)

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Who is this Thief in the night? Do you really not want Him to get into your house? What is He going to break into? Your life. Your very soul. And what will He steal? Your heart! Your very self. Your whole life – and turn it into LIFE eternal, which is always more about quality of life than it is about longevity.

Of course that is scary. *Of course* we are frightened by the unknown – by the possibilities and purposes that such a break-in is bound to cause in our lives. But we *do not* want that to happen? Really and truly?! That is not how the early Christians saw it. Their cry was, *“Maranatha!”* Come Lord Jesus! That is what the whole early church was saying to the Thief. “Hey, don't fool around on my account. Don't delay because I need more time or have some projects to finish up. *Maranatha!* Come Lord Jesus! Any time you like. The sooner the better.” Only, they knew they were not in charge. It was a plea – not a command. It all depended upon Him.

And by the way, many conservative Christians get this on the personal level, even though not from these passages. Their lives are blessed by an intimate connection with the Holy Spirit – one not always found among most liberal Christians.

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In any case, we cannot make up the real Christmas: Jesus coming to be with us. It is not under our control or according to our design. But we can try to be open and ready: expectant, invitational, welcoming. We can get the roads ready. We can make more room in our minds, in our hearts, in our schedules, in our calendars, in our plans and purposes. *Maranatha!* Come Lord Jesus! Whatever is in the way, we will get it out of the way. Please just show us how, Lord.

May your Advent be beautifully frightening. May your soul await His coming with eager joy and willing invitation. May you know that it is not your doing – that HE chooses you. And that when He does, it means God’s total love and grace and mercy – nothing you can make up or contrive or pretend. And most especially, may you remember that He does not come only once, or at the end of time, or in ways that shake all the outer foundations. He comes over and over, in ways large and small, until we ourselves are so made over that there is no break in the comings because He stays with us. Did He not say it? *“I will be with you always, to the close of the age – to the end of time.”* (Matthew 28:20)

Even so: He comes like a Thief in the night. He always has. He always will.

SUPPLEMENT

Since the time of King David – one thousand years before Jesus – nothing was going right; nothing was going according to the promises and prophecies. Israel was not coming into fame and fortune as the Chosen People. Instead, Israel had been conquered, enslaved, and decimated by nation after nation: Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and now Rome.

Finally, about three hundred years before Jesus arrived on the scene, humans figured out by logic and prophecy what God had to do to salvage the situation. So they started writing the script for God. Essentially the script called for what you would identify as the “Second Coming.” God must close out the age – redeem and honor all the good guys, defeat and punish all the bad guys – and thus restore things to the covenants and promises that the faithful had long expected.

Jesus did *not* bring us this message. It was already in place long before He came. In fact, despite all human certainty that our logic and our expectations were correct and that we knew what God had to do, what God actually did was a huge surprise. The coming of God’s Messiah – the True King of spiritual truth and power – was something no human had ever thought of. And of course this was completely different from anything our apocalyptic writings – our stories of the Second Coming – had ever envisioned or imagined. Through most of Christian history, we have tried to insist that our notions of what God has to do are more correct than what God actually did, and does.

Jesus taught us many things that contradict and dispute our notions about a Second Coming; a Judgment Day; a close of the age; a final battle that will save the worthy and make everything clear and right at last.

Jesus died and rose again, giving us the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us through all that is to come. Jesus invites us into His church – His *ecclesia* – where we may love, comfort, and support each other in our personal and mutual pilgrimage through this life. But Jesus does not take away all our problems or all the tests and challenges by which we must follow Him into authentic faithfulness, love, and devotion to God.

Yet the writings that reflect our earlier hopes and expectations are still evidence of the battle between what we wanted and what God was really doing. If we track and stick to the apocalyptic hopes instead of following Jesus into the true Kingdom, we will stay misled – and we will mislead others – forever.

For all its creative imagery and wondrous symbolism, the Book of Revelation – the most apocalyptic writing in the New Testament – does not tell us the truth. The Book of Revelation expects and explicitly tells us that the antichrist will soon come forth as a Roman Emperor, and that this will end up bringing everything to a head. But what really happened?

Things wobbled back and forth for a while, and then we got Constantine – an emperor who supported Christians, stopped the persecution, and ended up turning the whole Roman Empire toward Christianity. We live in a broken world – far from perfect. But for over two thousand year now, there is nothing but evidence that our apocalyptic expectations are a human contrivance – not at all what God is doing or ever intended to do. The Age of Apocalyptic Expectations must give way to the *ABBA* – GOD – that Jesus reveals and proclaims.

So Jesus’ teachings about how He and His Holy Spirit come in surprising and unexpected ways were dragged into the preconceived notions about the Second Coming and the “end of time” events. We know that the whole early church expected that the end was coming within their own lifetimes. And I do not exaggerate the blunder: *“Truly I tell you: the present generation will live to see it all.”* (Matthew 24:34) Either Jesus got it entirely wrong, or the disciples misunderstood Him.

As time passed, it became a big issue – a great consternation. What was the delay? You heard in one of today’s passages (II Peter 3:8-13) how some were trying to rationalize the problem by claiming that God did not count days like we do, and therefore the prophecies were still good – even though they had no relationship to anything we understood or could count on.

Are there any illustrations of a time when the disciples did not understand what Jesus was trying to tell them?

“He took the twelve aside and said, ‘We are now going up to Jerusalem; and everything that was written by the prophets will find its fulfilment in the Son of Man. He will be handed over to the Gentiles.

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He will be mocked, maltreated, and spat upon; they will flog him and kill him; and on the third day he will rise again.’ But they did not understand this at all or grasp what he was talking about; its meaning was concealed from them.” (Luke 18:31-34)

“At this Peter took hold of him and began to rebuke him: ‘Heaven forbid!’ he said. ‘No, Lord, this shall never happen to you.’” (Matthew 16:21-23) Peter missed badly. And in fact, before the Resurrection, none of the followers seemed to grasp very much of what Jesus was trying to tell them.

“The Kingdom is here – the Kingdom is at hand!” Does that sound like “the end of the age”? Indeed yes, if that is what you have been expecting to hear from the Messiah when the Messiah comes. Only, that is not what we hear from Jesus when He does come!

One thing we all say we know: Jesus was not the kind of Messiah anybody expected. He gets crucified instead of marching into victorious battle. His Kingdom is not of this world. He is after far greater goals than a temporary success in this earthly life. The Messiah of God has different goals and a different role from anything anybody was expecting. But there was no confusion? Everything was crystal clear to everybody? When do we wake up to the real drama and realize that everything was not all cut-and-dried? It was not true two thousand years ago, and it is not true today. Part of our pilgrimage is trying to comprehend who Jesus really was and what He really came to tell us, to reveal, and to invite us into.