

ARE YOU EAGER AND EXPECTANT?

So it's Advent. Why do I have us in the first chapter of Acts? Advent is about waiting for the coming of the Messiah, right? So is anybody here so blasé – so eagerless and unexpectant – that they only care about when Jesus came long, long ago, and they have no interest in how or when Jesus might come for *them* or to them? Christmas is merely an ancient legend – already over; already in the distant past. Is that how you read this story? Are all of you SADducees?

“This Jesus ... will come in the same way as you have seen him go.” That's the eleventh verse of Acts chapter one. Something about a Savior who keeps coming to us. Wouldn't that mean that we are eager and expectant still? Of course, most folk consign His “coming again” to a more traditional notion about a Second Coming that will close out life on earth as we know it. That's what people believed the Messiah would do for at least two hundred years before Jesus was born. And it's hard to talk us out of things once we have come to believe them. Humans decided what God had to do, and Jesus' failure to do it caused most of the people in His own time to decide that Jesus was therefore *not* the Messiah. How safe and comfortable we like to keep things. Christmas is in the distant past or it's in the distant future, but whatever else we believe, let's make sure it has nothing to do with us, and nothing to do with the here and now.

* * *

So that brings us to another conundrum about this very same verse: *“This Jesus ... will come in the same way as you have seen him go.”* Most Christians to this day assume that Jesus ascended into the clouds, and therefore He will come back down *through* the clouds, in a traditional Second Coming scenario that will close out life on earth as we know it. And of course, there is only one way to read or understand the Bible: in the most ridiculous and meaningless way possible.

Ancient people were not stupid. Some of them were more developed than we are – spiritually. Many of them spent more time in prayer and in the interior world than most of us do. But the outer realities have changed, whether we want to admit it or not. Their world was not overpopulated. The water and the air were still pure. I do not mean to imply that life was easy or that evil was not yet a problem.

ARE YOU EAGER AND EXPECTANT?

But loving your neighbor did not mean seven and a half *billion* people, and all of it complicated by international politics that they could not even have imagined.

If we really want to understand what the Bible is telling us, we have to start out by wanting to know what the biblical writers meant by what they wrote. But we cannot stop there. We must go on to ponder what their experiences mean in *our* world, in *our* time, and to *us*. Lots of it translates into incredibly meaningful awareness and hope and truth for our time that are just as valid as they were in theirs. But we do have to move beyond their understanding of physical reality, or we are stuck in foolishness that is unnecessary.

They thought Jesus went up into the clouds and on into Heaven. And when it was time, Jesus would come back in the same manner. But they thought God had created the heavens and the earth in the midst of endless waters. What you think is space, they thought was water. And they lived in an egg-shaped creation in the midst of the water, with Heaven above and Sheol below. The earth was flat and stretched across this vast creation. Above was the canopy of the heavens, and God made the sun to cross the heavens every day and the moon to cross at night. It's easy to flood such a creation if you pierce the sides of the great eggshell, which is what God did at the time of Noah, if you read the story carefully. It's easy for Jesus to ascend into Heaven if this is your picture of reality. Up you go, and there it is!

Jesus already knew better. "*This day you will be with me in Paradise,*" He says to the thief beside Him on the Cross. He meets Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, and they are not waiting in the grave; they are alive and know what's going on with Him. He tells the Sadducees that God is the God of the living, and He is not stumped by what to do with a woman who has had more than one husband. Life has more dimensions than we think, and Jesus trusts God beyond anything we had ever imagined before He came.

Nevertheless, none of Jesus' followers knew that the earth was spinning in space and revolving around the sun. None of them had seen the clouds from thirty-two thousand feet up – and all of *you* have. Through no fault of their own, the Gospel writers were still stuck in expectations they had grown up with, and none of them were able to grasp all of the new dimensions that Jesus was telling them about. So errors about the Second Coming, about how we die, about how we

have to wait in the grave for the next act of the play to begin; errors about how tentative and marginal the grace and love of God really are – many fragments and assumptions from former times still got incorporated into the New Testament, carried by sincere followers who could not grasp all that Jesus was trying to tell them. Lots of Jesus' ministry and the New Covenant He was enacting did not come clear until after the crucifixion and resurrection and Pentecost. And indeed, we are still trying to catch up and comprehend this incredible Messiah. Calling Him our Savior and our King does not mean we have graduated from some academy of truth. It means we are willing to go on following Him into the LIFE and the HOPE that He opens up before us. And Jesus opens it up for us just as fast as we are willing and able to grasp it. That never means we are past our *need* for humility or ready to stop learning.

But back to the New Testament story. When we stop taking one verse out of context and try to make it tell the whole story, it is often more profound than we think, at first glance. How does the Risen Jesus “come and go” in the New Testament records? Most of the stories say He appears and disappears at will. Nobody controls that. He appears to some women on Easter morning, and is gone again. He appears to some of the disciples that evening, and is gone again. He appears to Cleopas and a friend, and is gone again. He appears to Thomas, and is gone again. Okay, now we have it: He appears to various followers for forty days, and then is taken up into Heaven. Sorry, wrong again! He appears to various followers, but He also appears to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus – a year or two later. This is perhaps the best-attested of any of His appearances. Did Jesus come down out of the clouds to do that each time? Paul asks Him point-blank: Who are you? And the reply: *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”* And my problem is that He appeared also to me, when I was in sixth grade and desperately needed Him, and quite a few times since, but never in the same way. And He has appeared to quite a few of you too, and we are definitely more than a few years past the first Pentecost.

All cut-and-dried, isn't it? Do we have a living, active Savior, or a museum piece? I have problems with the Christmas celebrations of our time because they are mostly trying to celebrate a museum piece. And lots of people keep trying to make me shrink Christmas down to the pathetic shadow of His coming that has survived in the culture around us. Thousands and thousands of people in our time make it

ARE YOU EAGER AND EXPECTANT?

through Christmas every year, but there is no encounter with the Living Lord. I do not see myself as the curator of a museum, just because I am a Minister. There is no way to insult the memory of Jesus more than to come out of a celebration of His life the same as when you went in. We live in a broken world. We are not okay the way we are. Running our own lives is not good enough, no matter how adept we think we are at it.

And by the way, none of you have big problems with me because I do not believe the Scriptures. You have problems with me because I believe them so deeply that I keep wanting the *people* of Jesus to get more sincere, more devoted, more grateful to Jesus than the evidence all around us suggests we are. The scandal of the American church in our time is that in so many places, its members care so little that they are allowing our churches to die out from under them, rather than love and honor Jesus enough to make His church – His faith communities – strong and vital again. In our time and culture, almost everything is more important than Jesus' church. Almost everything else takes priority over the life of His church.

Is that just a vague and general comment? I love and admire many things about *this* church. I am grateful to be here. But the members of this church do not yet care enough to support and sustain the life and ministry going on here. I have a hard time understanding it, but it's true. I have some faithful friends who are subsidizing and sustaining what we are trying to put together here. But I do not know how long they will keep it up. Left to our own level of commitment and dedication, we will be gone in a year or two. Lots of you think it's fun to wait until the very last minute to turn in your covenants. And when you do, only a handful of them are close to sustaining and supporting even our current, meager levels of what a genuine faith community should be like in this place, at this time. Like it or not, that is also how we celebrate Christmas.

* * *

Advent is a time to wait and watch. We cannot choreograph His coming. A true Christmas is not something we can manufacture or control. I suppose that is why the secular Christmas keeps taking over – keeps stealing the limelight. As always, we want to be in control. We want to be able to “make it happen” when we want it – according to our time line, and according to what we think would be impressive. Why is it always so hard to make God do *our* bidding?

ARE YOU EAGER AND EXPECTANT?

Our passage in Acts is on point: “*You must wait,*’ Jesus said, *‘for the gift promised by the Father, of which I told you.’*” It is Advent – a time for us to wait and watch. A time for us to stop trying to make anything happen. Yet we can still be eager and expectant. But that would mean we shift from depending on ourselves and our own resources – a shift to trusting in God. Of course, that is one of the biggest shifts in all the world.

Do we know how to shift into that gear yet? I can still grind the gears something awful, when I try to shift into trusting God. Where does the gearshift lever go? I thought I knew. Can it really have been so long since I was using the trust that Jesus taught us? But there is no going forward until we find it again.

* * *

So where are we now? Well, I am in verse six: “*Lord, is this the time at which you are to restore sovereignty to Israel?*” Can you believe that? They have been through Maundy Thursday, through Good Friday, even past Easter Sunday, but it is like they have never heard a thing, never learned anything, never paid a bit of attention to anything Jesus is trying to tell them. In fact, Jesus has just been telling them to wait until they are baptized by the Holy Spirit. But knowing He is alive again, knowing He is with them – believing all the things *we* say are so important about life after death, about resurrection, and about how true God really is – none of it is doing them any good whatsoever. They are right back to the same old, same old. They do not care about being His church. They do not care about being obedient to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They know what *they* think the Messiah’s mission and purpose are supposed to be – and never mind anything Jesus is trying to tell them or prepare them for; never mind anything Jesus wants to ask of them.

“*Is this the time at which you are to restore sovereignty to Israel?*” Isn’t it time for the Second Coming as we have always envisioned it? Isn’t it time for God to step in and right all the wrongs, punish all the bad guys, and reward all the good guys? Isn’t it time to bring us earthly success and make Israel the most prominent and powerful nation on earth? That’s what they are asking. Screw whatever plans or purposes *you* have in mind; we want *our* success, *our* prosperity, *our* security – and we want it on our own terms and according to the hopes we have always cherished. “Merry Christmas. Peace on earth.” Never mind the

ARE YOU EAGER AND EXPECTANT?

will or purposes of God. *“I did not come to bring peace on earth,”* Jesus tells us. (Matthew 10:34; Luke 12:51) But what does HE know about it? We want what we want, when we want it.

Jesus is so patient with them it’s unbelievable. *“It is not for you to know dates or times Only the Father knows.”* Then right back to the true Message: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you”* And of course that is a life of faithful obedience within the fellowship of Jesus’ *ecclesia* – all of it surrounded by a broken world that does not know God, and much of which does not even *want* to know God.

* * *

So back to the plan we never wanted and never fully understand. *“You will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and throughout all Judaea and Samaria, and even in the farthest corners of the earth.”*

Well, it’s seven thousand five hundred eighty-eight miles from Jerusalem to Newport Beach. We *are* in one of the farthest corners of the earth. But are we bearing witness for Him? Are we waiting and watching for His coming – coming to us, not just to somebody else long ago or in the far distant future? If and when He comes to us, it is no longer just a fairy story; it is no longer just an ancient tale that is fun to tell the children every year. We watch and wait because Jesus’ story and purpose are true. But we cannot make it true for ourselves until He comes to us – as He has always come to His real followers.

* * *

What *is* the most important Message in all of Christendom?

Of course, we might answer differently, depending on where we are in our own pilgrimage and what circumstances we are facing at the moment. But I will give you a hint: it is not “Jingle Bells.” It might be about grace or forgiveness – if our own souls are awake enough to know their true condition. It might be about God’s love – if our spiritual loneliness is not hiding behind too much noise or fear in the moment. It might be about God’s Kingdom or the purpose of Life that stretches far beyond this physical realm – if we are not too focused on our own efforts to succeed or be safe here.

ARE YOU EAGER AND EXPECTANT?

But the Message that ties it all together, the Message that gives us hope and help in every circumstance of Life, the Message that turns everything from an ancient drama into a real and current lifeline to God ... is the Message that our Risen Lord is back with us as the Holy Spirit.

On any day, at any time, the encounter with the Living, Risen Jesus may resume, or come to us fresh and new, or maybe even call to us and awaken us for the first time, almost like being born anew.

This is Advent for real. We cannot control or predict the coming of the Holy Spirit, but we are told to wait and watch. Slow down. Put everything “on hold” that you possibly can. Get truly expectant and eager for a partnership most of the world does not even believe in.

Whoever you are, whatever your gifts or your flaws, no matter how well or how poorly you have done with your life this far, the Messiah of God knows about it and wants you in a love-bond partnership that begins the moment you are willing, and that will last beyond this world and into more eons than you or I can possibly imagine.

No traditional Second Coming can touch the grandeur of the real Message. No Christmas carol yet written celebrates the wonders of the real invitation that comes to us because of the birth of Jesus.

Merry Christmas indeed! But as always, we have to get beyond the twaddle, or we never hear the angel choirs.