

What Is It We're Waiting For?

Mark 13:24-37

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

When I was a young child lying in my bed at night, I would at times imagine all sorts of gremlins and goblins that would enter my bedroom and grab me while I was there half asleep in the dark. At four or five years old, everything was larger than life, and certainly larger than me, and I felt vulnerable to powers and people who had control over me. It wasn't rational fear, only a childlike one; but it was very real to me and, obviously, memorable.

If those fears grew to the point of terror, I would get up out of bed and gravitate toward the light outside my room and to the comfort of where my parents were. Or, if paralyzed by panic, I would cry out for one of them to come and save me. Invariably, one of them would, reassuring me that everything was all right, while calmly tucking me back into bed. They would explain there were no devils in the dark which threatened me. But I only believed I was safe from harm and could sleep the night away if they remained there by my side until I was blissfully at rest.

Those, I believe, were the first impressions I ever had of salvation. Looking back, I wouldn't have known what it meant theologically, but I would have sensed the feeling of assurance.

When I became an adult, I put an end to childish things on many different levels. As I grew older, I became less frightened by darkness or intimidated by powers greater than I; nor did I cry out to

my parents to save me anymore, as it was my own responsibility to address my worries, fears, and apprehensions in life as an adult. Like it does for most people, maturity and experience gave me enough perspective and confidence and less needful of a parenting savior to bail me out of my vulnerable moments. In times of stress, I developed the necessary skills to take on the challenges that earlier would have paralyzed me.

Yet, I still recall these childhood apprehensions, because on occasion even at this point in my life, I will sense those same primal fears, particularly when everything seems overwhelming or catastrophic to me. I look for someone or something to bail me out of my troubles and to assuage my fears. Vulnerability has a way of disarming us and making us feel like a potential victim to harm. The same childlike desire to cry out for a larger and greater power than I to come and save me still seems comforting, even if I entertain it only in my imagination. The assurance of believing that protection will come in the nick of time and that all things will work together for good is very appealing and desirable and helpful until the darkness lifts and the fears fade away. It is a faith to help calm one's emotions.

Since this is so intrinsic to human experience, I've wondered if much of what we inherit and believe in our faith tradition is somehow related to primal psychological fears such as these. Many of the biblical images of salvation appear to be little more than mythic impressions of God intervening in the nick of time and laying to rest all the anxieties that lie within us (e.g., harm that might be done to us, despair at the condition of our lives, vulnerabilities to illness and death, etc.). Faith, then, functions like a salve for the soul—an

emotional brace upon which to lean when we're unsteady and unsure. Like little children overwhelmed by the fears of the present darkness, we gravitate toward the light to find comfort, or cry out for a divine parent-like Presence to come to our proverbial bedsides to reassure us all is well. For many, that is precisely what their faith in God means to them. It offers reassurance when they need it.

If this is what faith amounts to—something to turn to when life appears overwhelming—it's not surprising then that skeptics have often claimed that religious faith is little more than a psychological and emotional crutch—a coping device for the weak—something the strong don't need. Is this an unfair critique? I don't know. Are we like a little child who seeks a savior to assuage fears and provide comfort, when if we were of a more mature mind, we would know much of what we face as humans is for us to wisely handle on our own? Isn't that what experience, education, and wisdom are supposed to do for us—to move us beyond childlike naïveté?

I won't go so far as to say religious faith is merely the product of an immature mind, but it is to recognize that our faith has to keep up with out intellectual development and move beyond the basic impressions and needs that come with childlike primal fears and vulnerability. Similarly, we have to recognize that traditional beliefs and dogmas can often restrict spiritual maturity by defining faith and the way God's presence functions in human lives entirely by an ancient worldview (with its fears, perceptions, myths, and mysteries) that no longer are relevant to a 21st century world. Many of us here would affirm that faith must be intellectually honest as well as emotionally satisfying; it cannot remain stuck in ancient paradigms

or responsive only to childlike needs. Otherwise, we would find it irrelevant to our lives.

I offer these thoughts for the purpose of helping us grasp what we are to do with Advent, and more specifically, the traditional texts associated with this season and the eschatological anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ, at least as it is described in the Bible and popularly embraced by a large percentage of the Christian world. Personally, I don't find this to be an easy topic to address because it is largely shaped by an ancient worldview that we don't commonly embrace today. Thus, in order to accept a literal interpretation of these passages, one has to suspend not only natural laws, but a good measure of our rational thinking, as well.

This is quite apparent to me in the various ways this biblical drama is portrayed in "End Times" theology (and recently displayed in living color in the "Left Behind" movie and book series), where the risen Christ is to come down from heaven on the clouds at the climax of Armageddon—the great cataclysmic confrontation between the forces of good and evil on the plains of Megiddo in northern Israel. The fervent belief of many in our generation is of this literally unfolding, discerned by "signs of the time" leading up to the end of the world as we know it. There are thousands of churches around this country where this is preached regularly with the hope and claim it will all occur in real time and in the not-too-distant future, I might add.

If you're not up to speed with this popular Christian message, let me briefly explain. At the risk of oversimplifying it, when the world reaches the brink of ultimate disaster (adapting a storyline

spelled out in Revelation), when evil becomes overwhelming and the power of Satan rules the hearts of humanity, Christ will return in glory from the heavens in spectacular fashion, executing his judgment upon the world and vindicating all those who remained faithful by believing in his name and in his return. They will be gathered up as the “elect” and saved from destruction, while the rest shall be left to face the judgment of God.

Honestly, if we didn’t know better, we might think this whole scenario was birthed in the fertile imagination of Hollywood, displaying the great archetypal drama of good defeating evil in spectacular fashion, like so many other blockbusters. Except, this day of reckoning is portrayed this way in a variety of biblical passages, including here in Mark:

But in those days, after that suffering,
The sun will be darkened,
And the moon will not give its light,
And the stars will be falling from heaven,
And the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

It’s pretty impressive and magnificent to imagine! In the minds of many, this is the meaning of Advent, the Second Coming of Christ. This Day of the Lord was the expectation for the primitive Church. Two thousand years later when we talk about Advent, is this what we’re still waiting for?

One challenge in answering this question lies with a literal interpretation, for it makes no logical sense, given what we know about the physical universe, earth’s atmosphere, and astronomy. When these images were composed, celestial perceptions were pre-

Copernican and anthropocentric, meaning everyone believed the entire cosmos revolved around earth and human activity. Ancient cultures commonly assumed that heaven was the canopy that hung over the earth beyond the clouds. All divine activity took place up there, represented in the “movement” of the night sky and the sun crossing through the day. The mythical perception was, what took place in the heavens simply foreshadowed what would soon occur on earth.

Consequently, this is why for thousands of years, astrologers served as advisors to rulers and kings, interpreting stars and astral events, as these were perceived as indicators of what the gods were up to and whatever took place in the skies would soon be manifested upon the world. It’s a dramatically different view of earth and sky than we have today.

Though in Judaism there were similar mythical views, there were also significant differences. Many Jews believed the realities of the world didn’t directly coincide or align with what was occurring in heaven—in fact, the human world was a corrupted contrast and rival to the realm where God reigned.

In the post-exilic period prior to Jesus’ birth, with Israel being dominated and occupied by various empires and dynasties, a messianic dream emerged which proclaimed the hope that at some point Yahweh, Israel’s God, would transform the corrupted earth with heaven’s presence and Israel would be emancipated from their current “Pharaoh” (e.g., Alexander the Great, Ptolemy, Antiochus IV, the Caesars), the Davidic monarchy would be redeemed and restored, and all the nations on earth would recognize the Messiah’s authority

and pay homage to Zion. For Jews, messianic beliefs were a means to be delivered from the darkness of their history. Their primal fears were answered by the promise of a divine savior.

For the early disciples, this dream was fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ—the one who proclaimed the good news to the poor, who died because of his prophetic witness, was resurrected from the dead and ascended in the clouds to heaven and would someday return to complete this transformation, uniting both heaven and earth in himself with God’s eternal reign. This messianic hope and expectation of uniting heaven and earth is still expressed when we pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”—a belief that heaven and earth will finally coincide. The early church fully anticipated all of this to occur within their lifetimes, and some despaired, as we can see in Paul’s letters, when it didn’t occur as they expected.

That was two thousand years ago! All of this, of course, was cast within an ancient worldview, which is quite different than a 21st century one, where such imagery makes little or no sense. The mythology of Scripture doesn’t match up with what we know about the earth, atmosphere, and skies.

So, then, what are we to do with it? How do we make sense of it? Are we to suspend our reason and intellectual honesty in order to claim it’s real and legitimate—that the future will unfold in this way? Or is the biblical imagery of divine salvation so closely tied to a primitive worldview and primal fears that it is virtually meaningless for us today? When we speak of the Advent of Christ, what is it we’re waiting for?

My response is that we still claim and embrace the Advent of Christ, but not by taking literally the biblical imagery we inherit or with an End Times theological emphasis and zeal. Instead, we embrace the meaning of Advent allegorically as an illustration of God's unyielding desire to transform and redeem the human soul and to unite the values of God and humanity for our collective survival and security.

The imagery of Christ's return makes sense to me when you and I fulfill the purpose to unite and align the values of heaven and earth—that the great hope we have is not waiting for some cataclysmic final judgment on earth or cosmic Savior to pluck us off the planet, but rather as an inspiration and enduring hope to bring into our lives and into society the values and aspirations of God, as revealed and embodied in Jesus. That's how we unite heaven and earth!

Where we witness the Advent of Christ is not in the skies, but in fulfilling Jesus' own mission. What this means is, every time and everyone who fulfills the Gospel ambition to liberate people from circumstances that enslave them, to heal people from their brokenness, to seek forgiveness and offer forgiveness for past wrongs, to reconcile and restore relationships, to pursue justice particularly on behalf of the disadvantaged and despairing, and to bring good to bear in the face of evil, helps to express the positive return of Christ to the world. The meaningful representation of Christ's Advent occurs not when our heads are in the clouds endlessly waiting for them to part, but when we're grounded in reality doing the persistent work of living out the Gospel in our daily lives.

If we can move beyond the mythic literalness that often makes a caricature of religion to rational minds, then we will be better able to claim the spiritual power and value of our faith to a world that yearns for good and hopeful news. Salvation comes whenever the children of earth can rest easily at night knowing that they are protected and all will be well for them.

All of this makes sense to me as an expression of what faith is meant to be in this generation, whereas trying to package it in theological dogma based in an ancient worldview doesn't. The word of God is the dynamic inspiration that speaks to us and leads us to do good; it's not merely the words and images contained in two-thousand-year-old sacred texts.

Above all, by embracing the love that God has for all people and all living things—a love so bright that demons are exposed out of the darkness for what they are—a love so strong that evil cannot resist its own transformation—a love so amazing that nothing can stand within its presence without being swept up by its wondrous grace, then no one's judgment—even God's own—will be able to frighten or intimidate us.

And we will know, without the shadow of a doubt, why those who yearned for this promise to be fulfilled in ancient of days, proclaimed, *Maranatha! Maranatha! Lord Jesus, come quickly!* For that will be our daily prayer as well, even as we work relentlessly and faithfully toward its fulfillment.

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