

Ascending to Nowhere

Acts 1:6-14

There was a strange sense of irony for me over the past week, following the terrorist bombing in Manchester, England. It felt as if I had already imagined this scene playing out long before—an existential form of *déjà vu*, if you will. The morning shows were headlined with the devastating news about the victims, innocent children counted among the dead and wounded. On the same day, President Trump happened to be in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, meeting with the Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, where he denounced the horrific brutality—vowing, as he often does, to purge the world of terrorism. If only he could. Three days later, ISIS terrorists massacred a busload of Coptic Christians on their way to a monastery in Egypt and an equally heinous act of anti-Muslim violence occurred in Portland, Oregon. If only such rampant violence would end.

When I noted the juxtaposition of places and populations, as well as their complicated histories of politics and violence, my thoughts went back a century ago when the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, penned one of his most familiar poems, i.e., “The Second Coming.” Yeats wrote it in midst of the Irish rebellion arising over British occupation, inciting waves of terrible violence that plagued the British Isles with bombings up until the peace agreement was signed, poignantly, on Good Friday in 1998.

In 1919, Yeats looked upon the world in which he lived, rising out of the ashes from the Great World War, where the entire landscape of Europe had been devastated by a level of death and destruction never witnessed before in human civilization. Four powerful empires violently ended within a few years’ time: Russian (1917), German (1918), Austro-Hungarian (1918), and Ottoman (1922). For Yeats and his contemporaries, it seemed as if the world was nearing its catastrophic end—that the biblical apocalypse was upon them.

I studied Yeats' poetry in college, writing a thesis in my senior year on this particular poem. Its haunting words came to mind as I watched the events of the week unfold:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

What might these lines mean to us in our present time?

As a young man, I was struck by the ominous tone and symbolism of Yeats' poem, as it reflected his own angst living in Ireland a century ago. I was also aware of a rising fascination among many American Christians with biblical prophecy, eschatology and, specifically, forecasting the Second Coming of Christ—an "End Times" theology popularized by the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible around the same time in the early twentieth century. My father's father, a dispensationalist preacher himself, carried a Scofield at all times, marked as it is with his own jottings trying to align current events of his day with biblical prophecy.

Even to our present time, among a fairly wide circle of conservative Protestantism you will see much the same, where headlines are read with prophetic interest. A Google search will reveal pages upon pages of websites devoted to discerning which of our current events are “signs of the time”, as if Scripture is merely a divine riddle to be figured out. Nevertheless, many eagerly await for everything to all play out according to the “divine plan,” including Armageddon—a war beyond all wars—which is believed will usher in the “great and glorious Day” when Christ will return in the clouds before the terrible judgment of God Almighty comes down upon the wicked.

If you’re not familiar with “End Times” theology, you might find it difficult to understand why there exists such uncompromising zeal among the religious Right to protect the state of Israel at all costs (including denying justice for Palestinians and Arabs) and why catastrophic events are welcomed as warning signs of the world’s end. You may wonder why there is so much anti-Muslim vitriol espoused even by “Christian” leaders—those who are certain believing Jews and Christians will be saved, while all other religions, especially Islam, are merely evidence of the demonic rule of Satan.

If my grandfather were living today, I doubt he and I would agree on much when it comes to an interpretation of Scripture or our respective vision and hope for the world. One side wants to do everything possible to save and heal the planet, while the other wants the world, as we know it, to come to its prophesized end. This conflict is carried over into politics where religious zeal is often valued far more than reason.

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

I should note, the Second Coming is not a marginal interest championed solely by the religious Right. In fact, it’s a central belief in Christianity and has been

since its origin. In the first generations of the nascent church, it was a universal expectation that Jesus would return soon—even within their lifetimes. This is apparent throughout the New Testament and in the early Christian expression, *Maranatha*—a Greek phrase meaning “Come quickly, Lord,” which was a common affirmation of the anticipated return of Christ.

Yet, it is also fair to say that those early perceptions were wrong, at least in the conventional way of expected fulfillment. Jesus did not return within their lifetimes to restore Israel as an independent theocracy, as believed. In fact, quite the contrary. Jerusalem was sacked in 70 CE, the rebel fortress of Masada fell three years later, and future generations of Jews became part of the Diaspora that scattered across the face of the earth, bringing an end to Jewish nationalism until Theodore Herzl and others launched the Zionist movement a century or so ago. What many within the early church were certain would occur—the restoration of Israel and Jesus as a divinely-anointed Davidic king—never materialized, even though it is plainly anticipated in certain verses of Scripture. So, what are we to make of Jesus’ promise to return again? What about his Second Coming?

To be honest, for this belief to be credible to us today, we must first abandon the ancient worldview inherent to Scripture. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that we are trying to profess a belief in something that won’t make sense, given what is known today.

Let me explain it in this way. If Jesus ascended upon the clouds into heaven, then where did he go? Where is heaven? To the ancients, heaven was high in the sky, above the clouds, unreachable by humans, but still visible to the eye and to the wise. In the pre-Copernican world, the brilliant light of heaven was perceived through the tiny holes in the black canopy that shielded its light during the night hours. Heaven was above the clouds and the night sky where the divine beings dwelled.

We, of course, realize that what the ancients thought was “heaven”, in reality, is the unfathomable cosmos—energy-filled space, billions upon billions of light years in expanse. “Heaven,” at least as the biblical writers conceived it, was largely a mythological construct of a place that didn’t actually exist. It isn’t a visible location—to the eye or to the wise. That’s where the biblical imagery fails us—something I wish people of faith would simply recognize and admit. If heaven isn’t what the ancients thought it was, if it isn’t where they believed it was, then what are we to make of this imagery? Where did Jesus ascend, if it was to heaven? Is it not reasonable to conclude that he, in fact, ascended to *nowhere*?

I grant you, this won’t satisfy those who want to believe what Scripture tells us to be true. Therefore, we must reinterpret what is meant when we refer to the Second Coming of Christ. Not only should we do that, but I believe when we do, we’ll realize this is actually what was meant by Christ’s “return.”

The opening two chapters of Acts reveal this, as I see it. What we find is the beginning of a subtle shift in thinking and in human experience that has far-reaching implications even into our present context. You see, repeatedly what Jesus prepared his disciples for was not a long, drawn-out, expanse of time between when he departed and when he would return—something that would now extend 2000 years. No, what he prepared his followers for was an immediate, yet different, *experience* of God’s reign and realm from what their theological and political assumptions had planned for. It wasn’t to be a restoration of Israel as a nation—it was to be a new sense of humanity!

This begins to be evident in these verses from our text for today, when the risen Lord said to his disciples:

It is not for you to know the times or periods that [God] has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

What is often overlooked is how the text shifts the meaning of “power” as a noun—from something a person of authority possesses and exerts over someone else (e.g., monarch, emperor, etc.)—something which is politically and structurally established and maintained by laws, institutions, hierarchical roles and rules (i.e., the common way of viewing the public exercise of “power”)—to another understanding of “power,” as in mutual “empowerment”, meaning to influence the hearts and minds of people by persuasion, by reason, by example, and by the meaning associated with common good. This kind of power enables people to make right choices, to speak the truth, to live according to the truth, inspired by the Holy Spirit—the divine nature within Jesus. It is, as the prophet Jeremiah imagined it (Jer. 31:31), the new covenant and word of God written into the hearts of people, not imposed upon them by law or command.

The first notion of power was what the disciples expected to occur when Christ returned, as evident by their question in chapter 1 (“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”—an important question under Roman occupation!). However, Jesus repeatedly renounced that notion of political and military power. It took time before the disciples realized that as well. The new covenant was fulfilled at Pentecost in the empowerment of the disciples, described in Acts 2. Jesus of Nazareth was not going to be an earthly political leader akin to David, or even return in the form of the Roman *deus ex machina*, a divine being coming out of the heavens to save the day, as End Times theology imagines it. Instead, Jesus would be present *in spirit*, returning in a form similar to his departure—from a dimension beyond the physical, natural, mortal state—from a dimension similar to his transfiguration—from a dimension of the spiritual world that would be ever-present and able to influence people from within their own lives and hearts.

This was the promised Second Coming of Christ—something I believe some of the New Testament writers actually failed to grasp! The first coming was realized in the life of Jesus; the second coming, however, was through the Holy Spirit—the presence of God in their midst—in their lives and in their communities. The coming of Christ in the Holy Spirit on Pentecost would bring about the end of the age when divine power was expressed only in military and political terms associated with Jewish nationalism and Davidic rule. The end of the age began at Pentecost—and was realized by the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of Israel, as it had been known.

That was the new reality when Jesus ascended into “heaven.” The eternal presence of Christ would not be known through a kingdom brought down from on high from heaven, but rather through the Spirit working on the grassroots level in the hearts of people. The power and presence of God would be evident in the influence of the early church beyond Jerusalem and into all Judea and Samaria, and ultimately to the ends of the earth—one life at a time. They were to accomplish this mission without the means of an army or military conquest, or by imposing their colonial rule over others (being the very methods that undermined the spirit of the Gospel throughout history). Christians were to possess a power where more and more people would welcome such love and hope into their lives, choosing of their own free will to join this grassroots messianic movement to transform and empower the entire world toward justice and love. It was the power of persuasion, not of domination, coercion, or manipulation; it was the power of profession and confession, not of imposition, intimidation, and control. It was the power of inspired people set free by the Spirit to do good—not the rule of monarchs that the church was to possess. This was intended to be a profound shift in the understanding and appreciation of God’s power being exercised on earth—illustrated in why the ascension of Jesus *to* heaven was immediately followed by

the coming of the Spirit *from* heaven on Pentecost. Jesus returned to them in spirit. In the imagery of the opening chapters of Acts, this change in the orders of divine power was made complete.

This paradigm shift that began at the ascension is still at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ today. It is a shift from viewing Jesus as some *transcendent* part of God returning to earth someday to being an *immanent* presence of God already here within and among us. It is a shift away from struggling with an ancient worldview where Jesus ascends to nowhere to deeply affirming and embracing our experience of Jesus' Spirit and presence in the *now-here*—from going nowhere to being present now and here!

This shift in the use and exercise of power, as I see it, has profound implications for these times. I certainly understand and sense the despair, grief, and anger over the great evils that are committed, especially in God's name. Instead of gazing up into the skies anticipating some cosmic Deliverer to come in the clouds, or despairing to the point where we give up hope for our planet and civilization, I still believe, as people of faith, we are called to live in the same Spirit as Christ—acting, behaving, relating to the world around us in the same gracious, merciful, and empowering manner as did Jesus. We must not allow ourselves to be defined by the headlines or influenced by the angry and violent rhetoric we fear. If we are inspired by the same divine Spirit as Jesus, we will be compelled to save the world, not destroy it—to redeem instead of condemn. We lead by example and by conviction that the power to love and protect is still greater than the power to exploit and harm.

Though the power of persuasion may not appear to be as effective as the power to dominate, destroy, and oppress, it constantly diminishes the impact of the powers that violate and harm people and all forms of life in this world. Love is the power to redeem. The rise of violent words and deeds may distress us, but by the

mercies of God, we must counter them with good; we must remind ourselves the world has been on the eve of destruction many times before; in those times, the Spirit moved people to wisdom, compassion, and action, redeeming much that was once evil into something good with the power to persuade people and, through them, to continue transforming the world with good.

I, like many, note how the great social reforms and movements in history have been led by those we know were amazingly inspired by God's Spirit. The power to influence the world for good is greater than we often appreciate, believe, or imagine.

So, like Jesus' disciples who grew anxious about his apparent absence, do not be mistaken and do not be discouraged; the same Spirit that inspired Jesus is already with us, among us, working within us, and alongside us to change this world for the better, one person and one community at a time. We do not have to wait for the Second Coming of Christ; we are already the living presence of the Second Coming of Christ! Remember this, and claim your spiritual courage and divine power!

Friends, may we not become weary of doing good or grow despondent over the times in which we live. May we not give up on the world or entertain thoughts of its catastrophic end. For we are among the evidence that God is still at work in millions, if not billions, of people who do no harm—that Christ is present and real among us, empowered by the Spirit of love, justice, and mercy with the mission to heal what's broken and restore what's good. May we be faithful to this until the day arrives when we all share in the new world that Jesus promised and inspired through his Spirit in human lives to create and to bless.

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