

BETWEEN THE TIMES

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37

Today's lesson from Mark's gospel speaks to us of the end of the age and of Christ coming again. What do we mean when we say Christ is coming again? What can we say about that?

Well, first of all, let's look at the fact that every year the church sets apart these four weeks before Christmas as the Advent season. It is a preparation for Christmas, of course, but always more than that. The clear implication is that as at the first Advent Christ came to earth in Bethlehem, so in the second Advent he will come again. One of the most treasured Christmas carols, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel . . ." reflects the same double theme.

We have domesticated the carol—and the whole Advent season, for that matter—and made of it simply a preparation for the day. But then when the day comes, there is an inevitable anticlimax. Except for the very young, Christmas Day never quite lives up to its advance billing. There is no "peace on earth" brought by the Christ child, at least no more than there was before; and no more "good will to men" than before—notwithstanding Ebenezer Scrooge's overnight conversion in *A Christmas Carol*. And so, because Christ was born in times past, we look forward to his "coming again" on Christmas, but when the day arrives, nothing happens!

Is then this domestication of Advent the last best word on the matter? We live in the afterglow of a great event, the coming of Christ to earth two thousand years ago; but there is nothing comparable to it in the future. Is that it? Except for a wistful kind of birthday celebration each year on December 25? Or is there a hint of something more in the undercurrent of excitement which creeps into these days before Christmas despite the inevitable anticlimax; when we live, as it were, "between the times," between an event in the past and an event in the future, both of which shed a glow over the days between?

We probe here into the mystery of time itself. And it is a baffling mystery. As Augustine put it, "I know what time is until someone asks me." You know perfectly well what I mean when I say, "now." But no one has ever been able to define satisfactorily what "now" actually means. We say it is a moving line between the past and the future, yet as soon as you try to put your finger on the line, in that very act the present has already become past. Perhaps the best we can say is that "now" is living between the times. As the great preacher George Buttrick once put it, "The [person] you are at any present moment is the fashioning of all your yesterdays—their hopes, joys, fears, failures, and prayers. But the present moment is also the anticipation of the future, immediate or distant, . . . freighted with longings and resolves." We live—and the only time we live—is in this present "now," a time between the times.

Moreover, the significance of the present "now" depends both upon the vivid significance of the past and the vivid significance of the future. If I am left with time on my hands or if time hangs

heavy—in short, if I am bored now—it is simply another way of saying that there is nothing much in the past or the future which intrigues me.

Nor are there any halfway measures here. If the past alone is significant for me but the future looks drab or hopeless, then my present becomes a feeding on the past, living on memories, and before long I'll be trotting off to the nearest psychiatrist. If, on the other hand, the future alone is significant for me and the past is drab or nightmarish, then the “now” is equally unbearable and I project myself into the future in excessive daydreams and detach from reality.

But there are moments when time doesn't hang heavy, it flies! And always because both the past *and* the future are significant. If you're reading a book and you can't put the book down *now*, it's because what you have already read leads you to look forward so eagerly to what is coming next that the present “now” is all-absorbing.

So we live constantly between the times, and some times are obviously more pregnant with significance than others depending on the content of the past and the expectation of the future, whether that future holds judgment or promise. For the student, the days before examinations are pregnant because of imminent judgment. The days before a wedding are pregnant, too (allegorically, of course!), because of imminent promise and fulfillment.

But in the New Testament and in the early days of the church, people sensed that they were living in pregnant times all the time—in an ultimate sense. Their immediate past was ultimately significant because God had invaded the world in a child at Bethlehem; he had lived, died, and risen again. And they lived each moment in the afterglow of this utterly unbelievable invasion of time by eternity.

But they lived not only in the glow of a tremendous event in the past. Immediately they coupled this past event with a future event of ultimate significance too, what they called the second coming of Christ, the end of the age when the kingdom Christ had established in their hearts would be fulfilled in the last judgment on evil and in the establishment of a world of perfect love and service to others, a world of peace when there would be constant joy and singing in the streets. They were living between the ultimate times and so every “now” for them was ultimately crucial and urgent. There is, consequently, a breathless quality, a living on tiptoe, with the skin fairly prickling at the thought of what had happened and of what was still to come, which haunts the pages of the New Testament. And you and I, living in more prosy days, find it difficult to recapture or even to understand.

And this for two reasons. First, the writers of the New Testament were so overwhelmed by the display of God's power over the world and history, by this invasion of time by eternity in the coming of Christ, that they were dead sure the culmination of it all would come in their lifetime. Christ *was* coming soon for them. It was simply inconceivable that what God had started he would not finish up in a hurry! But in time they learned that they were mistaken as to the when. And after two thousand years, you and I can never recapture this same sense of urgency with respect to the when. But this is of minor importance.

The second—and vitally important—reason for their sense of urgency and living on tiptoe in expectation, was their *desire* for it to come—not for release or reward, primarily, because it included judgment. They wanted it to come because the fulfillment of what they had already experienced was so infinitely desirable. And this is something we can possibly recapture. Today we attempt to echo that urgency in the prayer, “Thy kingdom come,” and in the

carol, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” which express intense desire and longing for the new age, for the kingdom of God to come in power and great glory, for all that to come that we think of when we think of heaven.

But as soon as we mention heaven, then the old cliché of the scoffers crops up: “Pie in the sky by and by.” Actually, this is an empty jibe nowadays because it overlooks judgment, but even more because our customary images of heaven prove the pie to be singularly unpalatable stuff. I don’t know about you, but our customary images of heaven excite no great longing or desire in me at any rate. Who wants to spend an eternity standing around clad in white robes, holding on to a harp, singing hallelujahs world without end?

The difficulty, of course, is to attempt to picture that which is beyond time and beyond our experience. The perfection of heaven presumably must be changeless because any change implies imperfection. But is the only solution to “freeze” time? To stand, sing, feast, rest—endlessly?

Keats may find delight in the frozen motion of the figures on the Grecian urn. Yet even he has to attempt to breathe some life and movement into the frozen figures: the musician “for ever piping songs for ever new”; and the lovers “for ever panting and for ever young” even though they can never kiss. Can we do less in our imagery of heaven? For if our pictures of heaven do not excite any longing or desire, if it is all motionless, for example, then something’s wrong with the picture.

Since we are time-bound and cannot think apart from time even though we know that God is above and beyond time, let us acknowledge this frankly and boldly in our pictures of heaven. For what is so unpalatable about our pictures of heaven is not that they are timeless but that they involve an interminable length of time. Therefore, let us be as bold as some of the New Testament writers who often picture heaven in terms of movement and change, even in terms of growth and development and discovery. Paul, for example, in one remarkable passage in the third chapter of Ephesians, suggests that those in the heavenly places continue to learn more about the ways and will of God as they watch his will working itself out here on earth. This suggests that there is more to learn about God—about reality!—even after we have seen him “face to face,” infinite mysteries still to be unfolded, thus preserving for heaven one of the priceless joys of life on earth—the joy of discovery. Or take John’s bold and gaudy picture of the New Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth: Here is a city with all it suggests of bustling activity, common concerns, common life. The gates of the city are open for the constant stream of newcomers. You don’t have to stretch the imagination very far to picture the concern for those who have not yet arrived, and then, upon arrival, the joyful welcome, with reunions perhaps and sharing of experiences. The image of the tree of life with its leaves for “the healing of the nations” gives concrete expression to a loving concern for arrivals who are footsore, torn, weary, and heavy-laden. Worship in the heavenly city—as here—involves more than singing; it involves hearts and hands. There is much to do in heaven, thank heaven! And the much to do is precisely that which we find here most infinitely worthwhile.

Now here is a cluster of images which picture far more accurately those hints and intimations of heaven we are granted here on earth. It is the fulfillment of all those things which God has disclosed to us in the coming of Christ and which we know in our hearts to be infinitely desirable. Here then is a divine interplay of love in action and adoration, of service and song, of discovery and celebration, of concern on the part of those who have arrived for those of us still

here on earth, echoing our Lord when he said, “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents

Now it was some such imagery of heaven which made the second coming of Christ not merely urgent in terms of time, but infinitely urgent in terms of desirability for the early Christians and for a whole host of Christians ever since.

Now what about you—and me? Each one of us is living between the times and even now is leaning on the future, looking for some kind of heaven. The only question that remains is what kind of a heaven do you picture for yourself in your future?

However you may picture your heaven, heaven for the early Christians had tang and zest. It was no pie in the sky for them, a secure spot to which they would one day escape. Rather it gave ultimate significance to a present “now” which was set about by risk and danger and death. In fact, it was precisely because they had learned to think less and less about themselves and what was going to happen to them, and more and more about truth and justice and love, about judgment and forgiveness, that heaven was so real to them not just in a far off future, but in the present here and now. So Paul addresses the early Christians as those “on whom the end of the age has already come” and then writes, echoing this urgency of living between the times, “Now is the accepted time.” In the Greek, the word “now” sounds like the tolling of a bell: *Nun* is the accepted time; *nun* is the day of salvation. And they didn’t ask for whom the bell tolled; they knew!

It tolls for you and me too, this everlasting “now.” And the quality of this present “now,” this time between the times, depends not only on the past but ultimately upon the picture of heaven that the future holds for you. It all depends in the end, doesn’t it, upon how much urgency we can actually bring to the ancient Advent prayer: *Maranatha!* O Lord, Come!

Now to the God of all wisdom, who strengthens us according to the gospel, through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. Amen.