

*Come Thou Long Expected Jesus:
Hope in the Future*

by

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Luke 21:25- 36

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”.

In the wisdom of the Christian tradition, the season of Advent always begins looking toward the Second Coming of Christ. These prophetic texts take us back in time in order to point us toward the future; and thereby, help us better understand how to live in this “in between” time – the time between the birth of Jesus, and the fulfillment of God’s promised reign over all of creation. These ancient texts acknowledge that the world is fragile, the human family endures long seasons of distress and uncertainty, but they repeatedly affirm a brighter tomorrow is on the horizon.

It is not an easy thing to do – looking back in order to have hope for the future, because we can see things that have transpired between when these words were spoken and now. The prophecy of Jeremiah, for example, announces that a day of justice and righteousness is surely coming, and that the ancient center of gravity for monotheistic religion – Jerusalem – *will live in safety*. But by the time Luke wrote this gospel, Jerusalem was in ruins; the Temple had been destroyed during a five-month siege of the city in the year 70 of the Common Era. The siege began on April 14, just before Passover when the Romans, weary of smaller insurrections by the occupied nation of Israel, mounted a huge and violent response. They killed hundreds of thousands of Jewish citizens, destroyed their religious center, decimated the city, and the early Christian churches were scattered throughout Asia Minor.

The gospel of Luke was written after this had taken place, so the memory of what Jesus said about the future coming of God was addressed to a people who did not need the word “apocalyptic” spelled out for them, any more than we do. The world they had known had been destroyed. What they needed was hope to hang on to. After the Fall of Jerusalem, they were already living with fear and foreboding, and felt like the powers of heaven were shaking, a sea of chaos was roaring, and nations were in distress. The word they needed to hear was the vivid, hyperbolic imagery of Jesus’ promises that the Coming of God in glory, would happen with a bang and not a whimper.

They needed a vision of God who would come with greater power than the devastating defeat they had just suffered under Rome. Addressing that need, Jesus gave them a glimpse of a divine plan which locates us within God's hope for the world.

Now, those who followed Jesus, and even Jesus himself, seemed to believe that day was coming soon when God would intervene decisively, when time and history would come to an end, and God's power and glory would redeem the earth. My preacher friend, Jon Walton, once observed that one of the complicating aspects of this expectation for us is that nearly every period in history, including our own, has seen a time of cataclysmic disaster, a time of stress among the nations, a creation gone haywire. Just think, Jon wrote, "of the Bubonic Plague of the 14th Century, the Influenza epidemic of the early 20th century; or the First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima; not to mention the wars in the Middle East, in Israel and Palestine; the tsunamis, the earthquakes and hurricanes." ¹

Updating Jon's list, we would add today's pandemic in which the global death toll is already well over five million people. More than a 140,000 children in the United States have lost a primary or secondary caretaker to Covid-19, and despite the increasing distribution of vaccines, this country is still suffering an average of eight thousand Covid deaths a week. And yet again, we have this weekend's news that brand new mutations may be on the way.

We can imagine standing alongside Jesus' followers who, earlier in this chapter, asked him in desperation when would their cataclysmic times come to an end? "Teacher," they implored him, "when will this be, and what will be the sign that the end will take place?" Remember, Jesus does not say, find a bunker and hunker down until disaster passes. He does not say, you are so special, all of this will pass you by. He does not

¹ Jon Walton, "The Day to End All Days," 12/3/06. Luke 21:7

say, turn off the news and blur your mind with escapist daydreams. Rather, Jesus says, be on guard; be alert to what is going on in the world, pray that you will have strength to endure, and be assured that God is coming in power greater than any cataclysm the earth has endured. In a word, Jesus invites us to stay grounded, to lean on one another, to join his work of spreading love and serving others, to live boldly in the present precisely because we have this big cosmic hope to live toward.

Willie James Jennings, Professor of Theology and Africana Studies at Yale, says of Jesus' vision: "Too many Christians have seen justification in this passage for an impenetrable pessimism that dulls their sense to the beauty of God's creation and the joy of being alive even in difficult times. Certainly, we can see in some events the operations of evil and human sin, which must never be taken lightly. However, for too long Christians have failed to frame this world within God's love and embrace, and have instead framed the world in horror and impending doom."

(A world-view of impending doom, by the way, is what leads to vigilante justice when people think they can take the law into their own hands, pick up a rifle and head into the streets to create their own peace.)

When Christians fail to frame this world within God's love and embrace, Jennings goes on to say: Then we lose sight of the purpose of prophetic reading which is, "to look for Jesus' return and not to look for our escape from the world. In expectation, we look for his soon return in order to sharpen our work and clarify our effort. We do not escape the trials of this life, but if we let ourselves be swept up in his vision, Jesus teaches us how to live in the present. We stay grounded, looking for signs "because Jesus is with us in the waiting and in our good work, sharing in our challenges but also offering us strength."²

² Willie James Jennings, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary*, Year C, vol. 1.

The story of Ben Schlappig may be an exaggerated example of the importance of staying grounded and looking for signs of hope in the future, but like Jesus' apocalyptic vision, the extreme can help us find our place within God's plans. When he was just twenty-five, Ben Schlappig became one of the biggest stars among an elite group of obsessive flyers whose mission was to outwit the airlines. His singular objective was to fly for free, as much as he could, without getting caught. Ben became a master of travel hacking, which he and his fellow community of mileage hoarders simply call their "Hobby." At the end of his lease on a Seattle apartment, Ben walked into the Sea-Tac airport, and as the journalist who wrote up his story for *Rolling Stone* said, "he hasn't come down since." In one year he flew four hundred thousand miles, enough to circumvent the globe sixteen times. He went 43 exhausting weeks sleeping only in hotels, and he spent an average of six hours a day in the sky. He says he does not consider himself a nomad; he's made flying his home.

So here's the deal. His passion for flying was born of heartbreak. When he was just three-years-old, he lost his oldest brother who was fourteen at the time. Ben's brother had been a stand-in for a largely absent father, but now even he was gone. Ben was eventually dismissed from his preschool because he wouldn't stop screaming. On the worst days, his mother Barbara did the only thing she could to calm her son. They drove to the airport and sat together in silence, watching the airplanes take off and land.

As a young adult, Ben Schlappig became a master of the game of turning miles into currency, maximizing the return on his investment. He distinguished himself, gathered a fan base through his blog, and became a millionaire. But the journalist who covered his story notes of a telling absence writing: "His trip reports betray a theme, in photo after photo entirely devoid of human companionship: empty lounges, first-class menus, embroidered satin pillows – inanimate totems of a five-star existence."

Ben repeatedly insists that his life can go on forever this way, but – traveling incessantly across the globe, he did discover he’d want to settle down someday. How did he know? He recalled the scenes he’d witnessed in Delhi’s Indira Gandhi International Airport. He said, “You see a whole family, as many as twenty people, picking up someone at the airport. People with flowers, people with balloons, people with signs. There’s something beautiful about that.

Of course, those greetings are always when people are welcomed *home*. “I want what I cannot have,” Ben Schlappig admits, “there’s nothing gratifying about that... The world is so big; I can keep running. At the same time – seeing a family in India with signs saying, *welcome home* - it makes you realize the world is so small.”³

Friends, the hope of the gospel is this: God is coming toward us, bringing in the future to welcome all of us home, to redeem the world as we know it, full of heartbreak and people trying to escape it. God is bringing in the future, to redeem the pain of our days, the isolation and desolation of human experience, with the fullness of God’s good power and glory.

We can try, like Ben Schlappig once did – to run from disaster, sadness and catastrophe. Or we can stay grounded and be alert to the signs. For we can see that Jesus is already with us in the waiting and in our work, sharing our challenges, and offering us strength. Strength, so that we can join him in holding up the signs for others, saying: the future is in God’s hands, and it is good. God is coming toward us with a sign saying, *Welcome Home*.

AMEN.

³ Ben Schlappig story from James K.A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine*, p. 83 ff.