

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, November 30, 2008

Face to Face: New Beginnings

“Face to Face with the Second Coming”

Mark 13:24-27

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a season of anticipation and new beginnings. It is the season when we reflect upon our readiness to welcome Jesus; when we, as followers of Jesus, anticipate and long for his coming. “‘But in those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.”¹ Our text, on this first Sunday of Advent, aids us as we strive for personal spiritual renewal to welcome Jesus. The second coming of Jesus will be a new beginning.

All good stories begin with “Once upon a time”, don’t they? “Once upon a time there was a land named Narnia.” “Once upon a time there was a kingdom called Camelot.” “Once upon a time there was a prince and a princess.” All good stories will follow this pattern, because they borrow from the true story.

As followers of Jesus, many of us believe that the story of our faith begins in Genesis 1: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” That is the beginning of life as we know it, but there was a prior beginning. The story really begins in John 1: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”

God existed prior to the beginning of Genesis 1. The life of the Trinity shows us real intimacy. It is true that God is strong, sovereign, omniscient, and omnipotent, but not by himself. God has always been a community of persons in the Trinity. In the beginning there was the community that every one of us has been searching for our whole lives.

We are made in the image of God. We are made in the image of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What a beginning. We are relational at the core of our being. Nothing will touch our hearts like relationship, either to thrill it or to break it. As followers of Jesus, we know the true beginning of

¹Mark 13:24-26

relationship and that is in the One who has always been in the beginning. All subsequent relationships, if not grounded in the first and primary relationship miss the point of true intimacy.

Indeed, Jesus prefaces our text² with a statement of the reality of what it means to harbor the deepest longing and anticipation common to every follower of Jesus' heart, that being intimacy. We yearn to be in a dynamic and vital relationship with Jesus Christ. We are waiting for his coming. "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming 'I am he,' and will deceive many."

Advent is a time for 'putting our spiritual house in order'. By examining our life's priorities, through the spiritual disciplines of prayer and reflection on the Bible, we can empty our house of the clutter that hinders our readiness to welcome Jesus. What is Christmas all about? It's about celebrating the birth of Jesus and being ready to welcome him. Jesus is coming again, of that we can be sure. But when, that's a mystery!

The story goes that on New Year's Eve 999 a crowd pushed its way into St. Peter's Basilica in Rome to pray at a midnight mass led by Pope Sylvester II. Some trembled, some wept. All were on their knees or prostrate in prayer. The beginning of the end, the great day of wrath, God's judgment, was moments away. For months reports of meteors and earthquakes seemed to signal the end. All across Europe, people donated lands, homes and goods to the poor to better their souls for the coming judgment. Sins were confessed, businesses neglected and fields left uncultivated as people waited in dread. On New Year's Eve at St. Peter's, the tension was so thick that, as the clock ticked toward the end of the millennium, one account says, "not a few [died] from fright." Then the clock struck twelve: "The crowd remained transfixed, barely daring to breathe." And life went on. Bells pealed forth and people cheered. So the story goes. But it never happened. Y1K came and went. There was plenty of fear-mongering about Y2K, not only about the technological catastrophes that awaited us but also, according to many religious books, the apocalyptic terrors that were going to be released as Christ was about to come in judgment. It just goes to show, once again, that Jesus really meant it when he said no one knows the hour or day of his coming. It is not our business to calculate his coming and certainly not to fear it, but to anticipate it in hope and do what he's called us to do day by day.³

What is God looking for us to do? Be and make disciples. We are to be a people who love our enemies and tell everyone about the good news of Jesus Christ. We are to sow the seeds of the Gospel; the results are in the hands

²Mark 13:5-8

of the Lord. Our responsibility is to sow the seed, water it and let the Lord do His work in hearts and lives. We should be faithful to tell a lost world about a saving Lord.

Being a disciple of Jesus is always a challenge and no more so than now. As followers of Jesus we are called to reject being Pharisees and Sadducees. As followers of Jesus, we are called to live as wheat amongst the weeds.⁴ Eastminster is to bear Jesus Christ to the world. Jeremiah writes, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.'"⁵

Face to face with the Second Coming. The Second Coming of Jesus is a widely misunderstood and debated topic, even among eschatology scholars. The Bible foretells of this "Day of the Lord" or "end times" event. Those who debate the components of the end times often speak of the rapture and second coming. The word "Rapture" is not in the Bible. Interpreters of the Bible infer this concept from the Greek word *Ôarpazw*, which means take away, carry off and catch up. Paul writes about this notion in 1 Thessalonians, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."⁶

The Second Coming refers to Jesus' return to earth, conquering Satan⁷ and reclaiming God's Kingdom with His saints.⁸ Jesus foretold of His return in Matthew 24 and 25. In these two chapters, He goes into great detail about the events leading up to the time of His return. Jesus says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."⁹ Here, Jesus states that God will separate obedient followers from the pretenders and unbelievers.

In the Reformed tradition, we believe that the rapture and second coming are one in the same event when Jesus returns to consummate the new heaven and new earth. The early followers of Jesus Christ knew that Jesus had

³Richard Erdoes, *AD 1000: Living on the Brink of Apocalypse* (Harper & Row, 1988).

⁴Mark 4 and Matthew 13:25-30

⁵Jeremiah 29:11-12

⁶1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

⁷Revelation 16:15-17; 17:14

⁸Zechariah 14:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; Jude 14

ascended to heaven. They expected that he would return for them as promised. John Calvin simply carried through that notion. When Jesus told his disciples that only the Father knew when he would come back, Jesus meant one event; a taking of the dead in Christ, the living in Christ, the defeat of the Evil one, the final judgment and the establishment of the new heaven and new earth. We are to be prepared and anticipate Jesus' return.

"One of the simplest possible definitions of the church is to say that it is meant to be the place where Jesus is visibly active in the world."¹⁰ In times such as these, there is a great opportunity for people to see Jesus. Each year Eastminster touches the lives of thousands. Children, students, adults, members and neighbors, near and far, are provided opportunities to know God, grow in God, connect in God, serve God and glorify God. Eastminster is about being and making disciples of Jesus Christ. What I love most about this remarkable church is that its people are committed to making Jesus visible. We are the best Jesus someone sees. Like Advent, we are about new beginnings.

New beginnings for Eastminster emerge every day. "Once upon a time"? No! Fictional stories begin that way. The Bible is clear about the true story: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."¹¹ "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."¹²

Advent is about new beginnings. Jesus Christ came into the world, fully God and fully man. Jesus Christ will return again, ushering in the beginning of the new heaven and new earth. Face to face with Jesus. Come closer. Be changed. Let us pray.

This sermon was preached on Sunday, 30 November 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at
Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Wichita, Kansas

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⁹Matthew 25:31-32

¹⁰Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 128.

¹¹John 1:1

¹²1 John 1:1

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