

Looking at the Ending First

Matthew 24:36-44

December 2, 2007

I.

Happy New Year! Today is new year's day in the church. We began to ring out the old church year last week with the end of Pentecost, and we ring in the new church year today with the first Sunday in Advent.

And we start in a way that might be unexpected. We might think we're here to celebrate Christ's birth, which we will do later this month. But today's Gospel reading speaks to us of Christ's second coming at the end of history, and we are warned that we do not know when it will occur.

Why do we do this? Why in the beginning of the story have we peeked at the ending? We do so to emphasize that the sure and certain reality of God's kingdom at the end of days is implicit in Christ's birth at the beginning.

Jesus is the link between two great ages. It is a time of already, but not yet. The Prince of Peace already has come, but God's peace at the end of history is not yet here. The world still is broken by sin and disobedience, and will not be fixed until the words of today's gospel reading come to pass.

Therein lies our challenge. We are called by God to find a way to live in the meantime, in between times. We are called to live Christian lives in the midst of this contemporary world of pressures, temptations, and distractions.

II.

Perhaps I could set the stage for examining today's Gospel with the story of the spider and the bug. Once upon a time there was a spider who lived in a wheat field. He liked his home, and planned to stay there for the rest of his life.

One day a little bug got caught in the spider's web. And just as the spider was getting ready to eat him, the bug said, "If you let me go I will tell you something very important that will save your life." The spider stopped for a moment, and told the bug to go ahead. "You better get out of this wheat field and find some other place to live," the bug said, "because the harvest is coming! All the wheat will be cut and gathered up, and suddenly you will be destroyed if you just stay here and do nothing. You won't be ready."

The spider said, "I don't believe all that stuff about harvests and separating the wheat from everything else. I haven't seen any evidence of anything like that." So the spider went ahead and ate the bug for lunch. A few days later, the spider remembered what the bug had said, and he thought to himself, "A harvest! That's foolish! I've lived here all of my life and nothing like that has ever happened. Why, I remember when these stalks of wheat were just a couple inches out of the ground. Nothing is going to change. Life is good."

The next day was a beautiful sunny day in the wheat field. The sky was clear and there was no wind at all. That afternoon as the spider was about to take a nap, he noticed some thick dusty clouds moving toward him and the ground began to vibrate. He could hear the roar of a great engine getting closer and closer, and he said to himself, "I wonder what that could be?"

We all have heard similar stories, haven't we? And they all contain some pearl of wisdom, and usually tell about an ill-fated central character who thought he knew best; a character who lived for the moment and believed he had all the answers.

III.

And even though we might laugh at these stories, the morals they contain and the messages they convey are not laughing matters. Today's Gospel is equally serious. Jesus said he will come again, unexpectedly and suddenly, and we all must be ready. He even compared it to a thief in the night, and used the context of the worst calamity in all history; the great flood survived only by Noah and his family.

What's this all about? Are we to live in fear of judgment? Does Jesus just watch on his heavenly monitor so he can catch us in a weak moment and press the "delete" key?

Not at all. It doesn't work that way. When Jesus spoke the words of today's lesson he was not trying to scare anyone, but instead was encouraging the faithful. In First Thessalonians Paul told us that "God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:9). God wants us to hear the words of today's Gospel not as a threat, but as words of hope that carry an eternal promise.

But we also are told to be ready. That was why Jesus referred to Noah. It was not so much because of the wickedness of Noah's generation, but because life was going on normally with nothing to suggest that the flood was coming. And it will be the same for us. We will be living our lives as we usually do, things will be going along as they usually do, and then the time will be upon us.

Now, a brief explanation could be helpful at this point. In the Gospel Jesus said he is coming unexpectedly. But in other parts of the Gospels Jesus spoke quite clearly about the signs of the end of the age (Mt. 24:1-31, Mk. 13:1-26, Lk. 21:5-28). He said there would be famines, and earthquakes, and false prophets, and that if those days had not been cut short no one would survive. And certainly the Book of Revelation uses apocalyptic language to describe a time of tribulation worse than anything we have experienced.

These prophecies are not inconsistent with today's Gospel. Even though signs of the end of the age could be apparent, the actual time of Jesus' coming still cannot be known. It will not be possible to decode those signs in advance. There will be no special class of people, or priests, or theologians who will be able to predict Jesus' return accurately even though things might be happening in the world that point to that fateful moment.

IV.

But what does this mean now? What difference does it make whether the second coming is about to happen, or is centuries away? Would we live differently in one case than in the other?

Here's an example to think about. Remember when we were in school and the teacher said "I'm leaving the room and I'm not sure when I'll be back. But if I come back and find anyone out of their seat, they'll go to the principal's office." Sound familiar?

And then what happened as time passed and the teacher didn't return? Didn't we get restless? Weren't we tempted to misbehave as more time passed and the teacher still was away?

But there is a big difference between being in school then, and living in the world now. If we actually got away with something before the teacher got back, there was a good chance that we would be home free, so to speak.

Is the same thing true now? Do we think that if Jesus is out of the room he will not know what we do? Do we think that all this end times stuff is somewhere out in the distant future and we will never see it, so we shouldn't worry a lot about it?

Well, one of the things we learned in school is that the teacher always did come back. And in the same way, today's Gospel proclaims the certainty of Jesus' return and calls us to be ready.

But we are not called to be ready out of fear, but with a sense of assurance. We should not feel a sense of doom, but the sure and certain hope of our salvation. This is not rocket science or complicated theology. We all can do it. We just have to think about it and make the effort.

And being ready does not mean being on the lookout, watching for Jesus to come back to the room, like we might have watched for our teachers, so we could sound the alarm or get busy quick. Instead, we are called to be ready all the time in the way we live our lives.

It's not like watching in the rear view mirror for a state trooper when we are speeding so we don't get caught. Rather it is watching our own driving so we don't have to worry about whether the trooper is there or not.

It's a spiritual rather than physical readiness. To be ready means living our lives by faith through the Holy Spirit in ways that prepare us for his arrival. And we can do that in several ways.

We can ready to catch patterns in our lives that are destructive, addictive, or that indulge our pride or vanity. Each of us, in some way or another, wrestles with that demon. Pride usually is a standard confession for me every time I prepare to share in the Eucharist.

We can be ready for opportunities to extend ourselves to others. Human need is everywhere, both in the church and community, and the need can be material, physical, spiritual, or something else. If you feel even the slightest twinge in that direction, see where it leads you.

We can be ready for temptation. I am not one of these people who believes that Satan is merely a symbol of the evils of human nature. Satan is a real spiritual being and is intent on separating you from God. And you cannot oppose Satan and win. He is too strong. All you can do is just turn away and turn toward Christ as your source of strength.

And finally, we can be ready with the truth, which is an elusive commodity in today's society where morality can be relative, ethics can be situational, and the basic question can be whether something works. We can become dangerously comfortable with a Christianity that is ready for the holiday cheer of Christmas, but not ready for something as serious as the second coming.

V.

As we go through Advent and Christmas, and as the new year comes and as the seasons change from Epiphany to Lent to Holy Week and Easter, we move closer and closer to the cross. From Jesus' birth we are taken quickly, it seems, to the last week of his life, and his crucifixion and resurrection.

And we certainly will have readings and sermons and Christian education classes that proclaim the crucifixion as forgiveness of our sins, and the resurrection as evidence of our Christian hope.

But none of that will come to fruition until today's Gospel reading becomes reality. It is not until Christ comes again at the end of history that the meaning of his crucifixion and resurrection will be fulfilled. It's like the promises of the crucifixion and resurrection are a check that God gives us to hold, but we cannot cash it until the second Advent.

That's why today's Gospel is so important. We don't hear much about Christ's return in glory during the church year, and it's very appropriate that we hear it now. And as we listen we can hear Christ's words in confidence that as we live Christian lives now, we will share the Christian hope later. *Amen.*